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WILL WILDFIRE, THE THOROUGHBRED; or, THE WINNING HAND.

BY CHARLES MORRIS,

AUTHOR OF "WILL SOMERS," "PHIL HARDY," "PICAYUNE PETE," "DETECTIVE DICK," "HANDSOME HARRY," ETC., ETC.



"COME ON!" CRIED WILL, AS HE WARMED UP TO THE WORK. "I AM READY FOR YOUR WHOLE COWARDLY GANG."

Will Wildfire, THE THOROUGHBRED; OR, THE WINNING HAND.

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CHAPTER I.

THE SCHUYLKILL NAVY REGATTA.

The wind was north-west. It needed no weather-vane to prove this, nor even the sailor's traditional wet-finger; for the flag that half-drooped, and half-revealed its starry field, on the steamer Wissahickon, and the long steamer that stretched lazily from the mast-head of the starting boat, plainly indicated a faint nor'-wester, strong enough to cool the September air, but not to unduly ruffle the river's surface.

The silvery Schuylkill was crowded with boats, of all shapes and sizes; here with a crew of professionals, or athletic amateurs; there with an awkward squad, who were adepts in the arts of oar-twisting and crab-catching.

On the sloping and wooded banks of the stream stood a host of lookers-on, many drawn there by the mere excitement of seeing a hotly-contested race, others eager advocates of the various competing crews.

For it was the fall regatta of the Schuylkill navy, and all those with a taste for good rowing, or a passion for sport, had gathered to witness what was likely to be one of the events of the sporting season.

It was growing late in the afternoon. The declining sun sent his long beams slanting through the thick-clustered woods of the East Park. Several races had already been rowed, and three crews of four-oared barges had just broken from the "start" at the Falls Bridge, and were rapidly darting down the wide, straight stream.

The excitement of the start over, the spectators gathered in knots to discuss the probable result, and to talk over the race yet remaining.

This was to be the event of the day, a hot contest between the two crack oarsmen of the navy, a single-shell race which would decide the question of the championship for the year.

And, although the crews themselves rowed for honor, not for gain, yet bets were freely offered and taken among the spectators, some heavy wagers being made.

"Two to one on the *Vesta*!" cried a sturdy, muton-chop whiskered person, attired in a light plaid suit, and with a decidedly English cast of features.

"Don't make your odds quite so heavy," retorted a scornfully-smiling bystander. "Jack Boyle, of the *Iris*, is not going to be rowed down quite so easily as you think."

"I'll wager that Huntly distances him. Hang it, if any gentleman wants to bet, I'll make an even-up offer that he leads him a good boat's length at the close. And here's the stuff to back my words."

He excitedly flourished a handful of bank notes as he spoke, and looked with an air of disgust over the quiet throng.

"Well, now," he exclaimed, superciliously, "I suppose this is what you call American spirit. Why, if I was in old England, at the Derby, I'd be snatched up before I got ten words out—if it were for a thousand pounds."

"It is lucky, then, you are not in old England, or you might be out of pocket," spoke a clear-toned, self-assured voice on the edge of the mass. "If you want to challenge all America, I am your lad, from a dime to a cool thousand. Just consider your bet taken—and you can tell me what it is afterward."

All turned to look at the speaker, who had just walked up to the throng. They were surprised at his youthful appearance, for he seemed a mere boy, or at least at that indefinite, unwhiskered age in which boyhood merges into manhood. But his handsome face, and open, engaging expression, at once took all eyes, while his tall, well-rounded, graceful figure seemed fitted at once for athletic sports, and for social enjoyments. He was dressed in a light, well-fitting suit, while a taste for ornament was shown in the flash of a diamond in his scarf pin, and in the solitaire ruby that burned redly upon a finger of his left hand.

"How's that?" cried the English sport, in a surprised tone. "Haven't you any favorite? I'm for the *Vesta* boat, high and dry."

"And I am for America, hot and heavy," retorted the youth, as he pushed into the mass of people. "Name your bet. I'll cover it, if it is for a swallow 'gainst a crow."

The sport eyed him dubiously for a minute, running his eyes from head to foot of his youthful antagonist, with a somewhat scornful smile curling his lip.

"Well, will I do?" asked the youth, quietly, "Seventy inches, from head to foot, is my measure." "See here, young fellow," returned the other, a little warmly. "I ain't much in the habit of betting with boys. And I don't bet marbles, or half-penny pieces. Maybe you'd best carry your pigs to a paper market."

"I thought so," the youth quietly replied. "Bliss is cheap. But you are not the man to back your blow with cash. I'll go from five dollars to fifty on the *Iris*, and give you a boat-length's grace."

"Five to fifty!" cried the sport, scowling. "Say

five hundred, and there'll be some inducement for a gentleman to see you. Here's an even five hundred that the *Vesta* shell beats the *Iris*. Is there a man here with the heart to take it?" He turned away from the youth as if he had finally settled him.

"I will take that bet," the latter quietly answered. "You?" in a tone of surprise.

"Yes, me!" was the angry rejoinder. "See here, my friend, if I don't wear side-whiskers, and a wrinkle in my nose, my money is as good as yours. You've thrown a slur on Americans; and I'll be hanged if you haven't to stand by your bet now—or sink out."

"All right, my covey," replied the sport, with a look of more respect for his young challenger. "Plank up the needful. Here's my materials; and I don't take no bets on spec, from strangers."

The youth replied by pulling out a well-filled pocket-book, and quickly counting some crisp bank notes of large denomination.

"That the *Iris* beats the *Vesta* by a boat's length. That's my bet," he remarked. "And here's the stuff to back it."

"Correct. And the boat that backs down from rowing is beat?"

"I don't think there will be much back down," rejoined the youth. "Huntly and Boyle are not of that sort. But you can make it so. I am agreeable."

A well-known member of one of the boat clubs was selected as stake-holder, and the bet made.

But the keen eyes of the young man had noticed a peculiar expression upon the face of his competitor, a sort of repressed triumph, which made him think there might possibly be some trick concealed in the terms of this wager. Why did he hint at a boat's backing down?

"It's a deuce of a bad business," spoke a person who at this instant came up to the circle, addressing the stake-holder. "The best match we've had for five years clean spoiled."

"Spoiled? What do you mean? Is anything wrong?"

"Why where in the world have you been that you haven't heard? Everybody's wild about it. Jack Boyle has slipped and given his wrist a bad sprain. Huntly has only got to walk over the course."

"The thunder you say! And here I am holding the stakes for a five hundred bet on the race.—Is the wager off, gentlemen?"

"Off? Not much!" replied the Englishman sneeringly. "It's a square bet, and it stands. I've got nothing to do with Jack Boyle's wrist."

"Did you know this before you offered the bet?" asked the youth quietly, but with a snap in his eyes, and a red spot in each cheek.

"What has that got to do with it?" rejoined the sport, sarcastically. "I offered my money squarely. It's a square bet; and I reckon I'll rake in the plunder."

"Maybe you will; but I reckon not," quietly answered the youth.

"I leave it to the referee."

"I am afraid you have last, young man," said the stake-holder. "The *Iris* seems to be out of the race."

"What is the hour for this race?"

"Five o'clock."

"And it is only half-past four now. Will any gentleman present explain this conundrum; how a race can be lost before the hour for rowing it?"

"That's so!" cried several voices.

"The bet was not on Huntly and Boyle, but on the *Iris* and *Vesta* boats."

"Very true," acknowledged the stake-holder.

"And it don't matter a pin who rows the *Iris*, so that she comes in ahead."

"Nobody said it did," rejoined the Englishman, with a sneering laugh.

"All right, my friend. The *Iris* is not out of the race till the hour is past. You had better save your crew till you are out of the woods."

The speaker walked away with a light, springy step, every eye following his graceful figure as it moved toward the group of boatmen near the starting-point of the race.

"What in the blazes does he mean?" asked the astounded Englishman. "Jack Boyle is past rowing, and there is not a man in the State that can handle an oar against Huntly."

"Faith, I've a notion you are right there," replied the stake-holder. "Now that Boyle's out of the race they won't stir up Ben Huntly's match at any five minutes' notice."

Meanwhile the youth had joined the group of boatmen and was eagerly talking with them.

And as the half-hour short of the time fixed for the race wore on, certain significant movements were observed. Could it be that Jack Boyle was going to attempt the race with a sprained wrist? It seemed incredible, yet no one could otherwise explain the rumor that was spreading through the crowd, that the race was to be rowed.

"It will be a clean walk over for Huntly, any way," said the English sport. "I wonder that Jack will make such an exhibition of himself."

But it was not Jack Boyle, that tall, trim, athletic figure that stepped from the boat-house, dressed in crimson tights and cap, and with the knotted muscles swelling on his bared and powerful arms.

He was at least two inches taller, and walked with a lightness very different from Jack's sturdy tread.

"Who can he be?" was the question that passed from mouth to mouth.

The betting Englishman uneasily pressed forward, and gazed inquiringly into the young man's face.

"Well, I'll be eternally rick-strawed!" he cried, with a start of surprise. "You are not going to try this race, yourself?"

"Oh, yes! A chap can't let a cool five hundred

slide without a dash for it, you know," drawled the youth, for it was no other than he. "Of course I don't suppose an amateur can beat an old rower like Ben Huntly; but then, you know, a chap's got a right to try?"

"Beat him? Why he can discount you, and then beat you," retorted the Englishman, turning away with a look of relief.

Yet there was a smile upon the young man's face as if he was not quite so sure of this result. And a wish for his success arose in the hearts of many of the spectators, who were taken captive by his graceful and manly bearing.

Ten minutes more, and the signal was given. The boats broke away like mettled steeds, and, side by side, shot down the stream, while a shout that made the woods ring again rose from a thousand voices.

It was an exciting scene. The broad meadows and sloping woodlands that bordered the stream, were crowded with spectators, the somber attire of the men in contrast with the gay apparel of the women, while the waving of hats and handkerchiefs gave them a striking animation. The stream, silvered by the declining sun, was alive with boats, while a steamboat, crowded with passengers, and brilliant with flags, heaved its dark bulk down the current, keeping well behind the two competing boats, which occupied a clear space in the mid line of the river.

But the vigorous rowers paid little attention to all these distracting causes. The oars rose and fell with clock-like regularity, and with a long, strong stroke that sent the boats darting ahead like arrows, at every sweep of the bending blades.

It was soon evident that the *Vesta* was not going to have such an easy walk-over as some had anticipated. Even the boatmen who had agreed to the change in the match were astonished at the vigor and skill with which the young stranger handled his oars. Half the course was rowed, and yet the two boats stood side by side, not a foot of gain on either side being visible.

But neither seemed yet to have put his full strength into the effort. Huntly, evidently annoyed at this unexpected persistence of his opponent, now began to display some of his reserve strength. A quick, fierce spurt sent his craft a boat's length ahead.

But his competitor rowed on with the same long, regular stroke, a smile marking his lips as if he felt that his turn was to come yet.

But he was putting more strength to his work, for plainly his boat was again overlapping the *Vesta*. Huntly perceived this, and spurted again. Yet he was exhausting his reserve strength without gaining any permanent advantage over his opponent, whose boat crept up with a steady and alarming persistence.

The excitement on the banks of the stream grew intense at sight of this unlooked-for evenness of match. The change in rowers had, with a strange mental telegraphy, become known along the whole course, and Huntly's reputation made people predict him an easy victory.

But his unknown competitor was now rapidly gaining adherents.

"Who can he be?" asked a bright-eyed, fair-faced young lady, who stood with a companion on the brow of the hill overlooking the close. "I declare it is quite romantic. There they come, round the bend—and the two boats side by side!"

"Oh, Mr. Huntly is only playing with him!" replied the lady whom she had addressed. "He won't carry away the honors from Philadelphia as easily as that."

"But just see him!" exclaimed the first speaker, leveling her opera-glass upon the strange rower. "What a splendid-looking fellow he is! Just the build for a hero!"

"But Huntly has the lead."

"Very little," rejoined the other, still using her glass. "And see! Oh, see, Lucy! Isn't that magnificent! Look at them now!"

Her exclamation was echoed by a cry from the crowd lower down the hillside. For, at that moment the stranger had made a vigorous spurt, displaying a strength which no one had given him credit for. His boat, already overlapping that of his opponent, crept rapidly up. The bows lined each other. Then the *Iris* crept ahead, slowly passing the *Vesta*.

It was this that had caused the cry. They were now at the head of Peter's island, scarce a hundred yards from the end of the course. Huntly, perceiving the danger of defeat, put forth his remaining strength. But he had weakened himself by previous efforts, and the husbanded strength of his opponent now began to vigorously tell.

Inch by inch, foot by foot the *Iris* overlapped the *Vesta*. The island was passed, and the clear stream beyond gained. A few more strokes of the rapidly-moving oars, and a new shout arose. Clear water was seen between the bow and stern of the two boats. The *Iris* was more than a boat's length in advance.

A minute more, and they shot over the closing line almost simultaneously, the *Iris* the winner by a full length.

And then a cry arose to which all previous shouts had been whispers. The steamer added its shrill whistle, and every spectator seemed wild with excitement.

"The best rowed race in a dozen years!" cried one excited boatman. "Who is he? Who is this wonderful stranger?"

"Only a Yale boy," answered the youthful conqueror, as he skillfully brought his boat around to the shore. "Will Wildfire, of Yale, at your service."

Will Wildfire, the Thoroughbred.

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"Good gracious! it's no wonder he's scored one against Ben Huntly! I'll be hanged if it ain't the great stroke-oar of the Yale College crew coming here to play with our Schuylkill amateurs! The best rower in New England!"

A new chorus of shouts arose, while the name of Will Wildfire was on every lip, as the tall, graceful stranger stood erect in his frail boat, and bowed his acknowledgments, a quiet smile marking his lip.

At this moment a bouquet of beautiful flowers fell at his feet. He hastened to pick it up, and cast his eyes up the hill slope, catching sight of a bright young face leaning over the railing at its summit, from whose extended hand the flowers seemed to have come.

He pressed them to his lips and bowed his acknowledgments; while the face blushingly withdrew, but not until it had indelibly stamped itself upon his mind.

CHAPTER II.

WILL WILDFIRE'S SECOND SCORE.

"I've only got one rule, and that is, to get even. Folks get ahead of me sometimes, that's sure. But get ahead is one thing; and stay ahead is another."

The speaker toyed with a glass of ale, which stood upon the table before him. He lifted it to his mouth and took a hearty draught as he closed, wiping his lips with a peculiarly impatient dash of his hand.

It was in what may be called a respectable ale-house, one of the aristocrats of its class, and much frequented by high-toned lovers of this peculiar beverage.

"You did not fall in love with this young blood, then?" asked his companion, looking slyly up at the first speaker.

"Well, not altogether and entirely. I can't say that I'm looking around just yet to buy him a Christmas present; blast his picture."

He fastened his eyes moodily upon his younger companion. The latter was a大大ly-dressed, rather good-looking young man, boasting a well-cultivated mustache, and a set of glittering white teeth. He had a habit of showing the latter in something of a cat-like manner; while there was a dubious, uncertain look about his eyes, which would have warned any prudent observer to avoid too close contact with him.

"Who would ever have thought it was in him? A mere boy; and to outrun an old sport like Ben Huntly? He tickled you to the tune of a five-hundred, eh?"

"I bet he did," was the reply; with a savage scowl. "But you are not the chap to be salted easily. Was it square?" asked the young man, in his slow, penetrating tone.

"Square!" ejaculated the other. "I made it square, hang me for a fool! I made it so infernally square that I didn't leave a pin-hole to creep out of!"

"I should have thought that Luke Lister was too old a bird to let himself be caught by his own chaff," came the insinuating voice of his comrade.

"Did you never hear of setting a trap for a weasel, and getting caught in it yourself?" replied Luke, fiercely. "Why blast it all, I had the thing down so fine, that I staked my last dollar on it. The hound wiped me out, dry! Who would ever have thought of waking up the Yale champion in a bragging, smooth-faced boy? And the worst of the whole rascally job was to see him lift in my cash, with as easy an air, hang him, as if he was in the habit of stumbling over hundred-pound bills every day of his life!"

The baffled English sport grew angrier the more he thought of the cuteness with which he had sold himself.

"Oh, well, there are more days than one, you know," remarked his foppish companion. "He's led the left bower on you; but you might get the chance to play back the right on him."

"If I do I'll pepper him, you can go your bottom penny on that!" and Luke Lister put on a tigerish aspect of countenance.

"I've got a crow to pick with Will Wildfire myself," rejoined the young man. "We might help one another to a little revenge on this brave college blood. But fill up; your glass is empty."

"I don't care if I do," answered Luke, rapping loudly for the bar-tender.

"Do you know that the wager he scorched you out of ought to have been mine?"

"How in the blazes do you make that out?" blowing the foaming cap from his new glass of ale.

"Because he won it with my money," replied the young fop. "I was chiseled out of the cash I ought to have had from old Harry Wildfire's estate, and this boy has nabbed it all."

"I don't see how you figure that up. Mark Preston is one name, and Harry Wildfire is another. You could not have been a direct heir to the rich old 'coons."

"I was as near as this bragging boy. But the old man took a fancy to his college-bred nephew, and left me out in the cold."

"Wheh!" whistled Luke. "The cow jumps to that tune, hey? Why sell me, if that don't leave my puny five hundred all in the shade. But is there no knot-hole in the fence? Were you sold out as square as I was?"

"Hardly," replied Mark, showing his white teeth. "There's a way of getting even. Just a little hitch in the will, you know. But can I trust you?"

"What! Against this chap? Well, if you can't, there's no use talking! I don't like him for a ha'penny."

"I may need a friend, you see," and the soft voice took its most insinuating tone, while a cat-like glint shone in the half-lifted gray eyes.

Their voices fell, as the subject of conversation became more confidential. Several minutes of low, earnest talk followed, in which the young man seemed eagerly impressing certain distasteful views on his comrade.

"No, I'll be flummoxed if I do!" exclaimed Luke, striking his hand vigorously on the table. "It's got to be a square set-to, and no beating round the bush. You can back me up against any thing but the law. But I'm off the track when the law is entered for the race. If it was a square-up bout with fists, now, I'd like nothing better than to take some of the conceit out of him."

"You? Why he'd polish you down in a twinkling."

"Let him try it on!" cried Luke, furiously, as he rose from his chair. "He will find what stuff there is in English oak."

He walked toward the bar at the same instant that two young men entered the door of the tap-room.

A glance revealed to the previous occupants of the room who they were. The shorter figure was that of Ben Huntly, of the Vesta Boat Club. The other was Will Wildfire, his late opponent in the race.

They were laughing, and seemed the best of friends, as they stepped up to the bar.

"Here's better luck next time, friend Huntly," cried Will, cheerily, as they took up their wine-glasses. "You would have beaten me as it was if you hadn't wasted your strength too soon. I played an old Yale trick on you."

"That won't do, Will," returned Huntly. "It was a fair defeat. But I don't give up the glove yet. Here's fortune."

The two young men lifted their glasses, heedless of the angry looks cast upon them by the previous occupants of the room.

Luke's eyes glared, as he caught sight of the person against whom he cherished such fierce resentment. As for Mark Preston, he sat back indolently curling his mustache, yet casting a significant look at his bluff comrade as he covertly pointed at Will.

The latter had just lifted his glass to his lips, when his elbow was jolted with a force that sent the wine over his clothes, and over the tap-room floor.

Turning instantly on his heel he saw before him the face of his opponent in the wager, with a look upon it which showed that there was design, not accident, in the assault.

The red blood flushed in an instant to the boy's fresh cheeks.

"You have had the wine," he ejaculated. "You can have the glass."

In an instant the empty glass was flung with a sure, quick aim. It would have struck full the insulting face before him, but for a hasty stoop on the Englishman's part. As it was it took off his hat in its flight, and splintered into a thousand tinkling fragments against the opposite wall.

"That's for you, for an awkward fool, or an insulting rascal!" cried Will.

"All right, my handsome covey," exclaimed Duke, doubling his fists, and advancing upon his lighter built opponent. "Only nobody don't fling wine-glasses at me, and get off with whole skins. Square yourself, for I'm going to settle your bacon."

"Come, come; none of this," said Huntly. "Let us go, Will. We don't want any squabbles with roughs."

"Why, if he is so anxious," replied Will, leaning indolently against the bar, and fixing his eyes calmly upon his furious opponent. "I've shown my hand, and I am the boy to back it up."

It was evident that Luke was a practiced boxer, by his mode of approach. Huntly grew doubtful of the result, as he noticed the difference in size of the two opponents, and Will's apparent ignorance of the art of self-defense.

"Stand back!" he cried, sternly. "If you touch him you have me to settle with."

"Oh, leave him alone, Huntly," enjoined Will, quietly. "If he's so hot for satisfaction let the poor devil have what he can get of it."

Luke, yet more furious at this sarcastic defiance, struck a fierce blow at the open face of his youthful opponent.

But the result was remarkably different from what he had anticipated. Although Will had seemed off his guard, yet his keen eyes had not for a second left those of his antagonist. In an instant his right arm was up in defense; a quick side thrust had warded off the stroke, and then his own left hand shot out like an arrow.

The blow struck Luke fairly in the forehead, and if it had been a stroke from a hammer he could not have gone down more suddenly.

"First knock-down for Wildfire," cried Will. "You see, Huntly, that rowing muscle is good in a scrimmage."

Huntly, astonished at this result, laughed, and suddenly changed his opinion as to Will's boxing capacity.

"Look out! He's up again!" cried Will's comrade.

It was with the ferocity of a maddened bull that Luke now rushed at his quiet opponent. But he had learned, by sad experience, to be more wary, and for several minutes blows were exchanged without any advantage on either side, Will showing all the skill of a practiced boxer.

Then that steel-like left arm got in again—this time on Luke's temple. He fell like a log to the floor, stunned and insensible.

"There, I guess that mill's over," remarked Will, cheerily. "I'll have another glass of wine, landlord; mine got somehow split. Fill up again, Huntly."

"Something besides the wine got split," rejoined

"It don't do to row against Yale, you see," reminded Will, turning and casting a glance toward Mark Preston, who had sat unmoved, his eyes alone taking part in the combat.

Will slightly started, as he apparently recognized him. He said nothing, however, quietly drawing his glass.

"Well, shall we vamoose the ranch, Will?" asked Huntly. "Or does this sport want more polishing?"

"No, I think he has his rations for to-day," laughed Will.

The two young men had been gone several minutes before the fallen bully recovered his senses. He sat up on the floor, still dazed, and looking around him with a stupefied aspect.

Mark Preston now rose, and lent him his hand to assist him to his feet.

"There is another debt you owe Will Wildfire," insinuated the young man. "You can put that along with your lost wage."

"May I be switched if I ain't your man, Mark Preston," cried the whipped bully. "Say the word and I'll join you. Anything to beat this young bully."

CHAPTER III. THE BALL AT THE ACADEMY.

The silvery tones of the music thrrobbed and pulsed, kept time to by the beat of dancing feet, as the whirling waltzers went, in giddy mazes, round and round the broad floor of the Academy of Music; while hundreds of strange figures roamed hither and thither, inclosed within the broad circle of dancers.

For it was the first grand fancy dress ball of the season, one of those hilarious German festivals in which the spirit of oddity reigns supreme lord of the occasion. Every conceivable costume adorned the merry participants in the mirthful scene; some rich in texture, and in harmonious keeping with the character; others ridiculously odd and grotesque. Knights and clowns, kings and jesters, Gipsies and savages, demons and harlequins, and other indescribable characters, wound out and in through the crowded maze, in a brilliant confusion of color and glitter of gems.

And add to this the tones of a thousand busy voices, the constant ring of merry laughter, the echoing harmony of the music, and the well-timed fall of dancing feet, and we have a scene long to be remembered.

Above shone the multitudinous lights of the grand chandelier, pouring down its luster like a midnight sun; from the galleries looked down a thousand pleased faces; on the stage was set the scene of a hundred-columned temple of the past, seeming to extend the dancing floor interminably backward; and the interweaving of rainbowed color and jeweled light from the thronged parterre, formed a most magnificent vision of splendor and festive gayety.

On the dancing floor mirth reigned supreme. The various strange characters each sought to keep up the spirit of his assumed form. Here a sibyl was reading the palm and telling the fortune of a grave old Roman. There a jester, with cap and bells, parried jokes, or told merry truths, to all he met; yonder an almond-eyed Chinaman chattered "pigeon English" to a copper-colored Indian, magnificent in plumes and vari-colored blanket. And here lords wandered arm in arm with market women, or slipped pantaloons with glittering Columbines; while elsewhere one might see a jesting clown graciously smiled upon by a bejeweled duchess.

One character—a tall, graceful figure, attired in a suit of chain armor, whose polished rings glittered, and tinkled like silver bells at every tread—had just broken through the circle of dancers, and was walking listlessly through the laughing crowd, nothing of his visioned face visible but a pair of keen eyes, and the lower part of a well-rounded, unwhiskered face. "Why so melancholy, Sir Knight?" came a voice in his ear. "Have you just escaped from the grave of the past that you wander like a shadow through the halls of mirth?"

The knightly figure quickly turned to behold beside him a slender, graceful woman's form, dressed to represent the "Queen of Night," while a veil that sparkled with stars fell to her waist, revealing only the faintest outlines of the face, and the dim glow of laughing eyes.

"War is for Knights, not laughter," came back in deep tones. "Chivalrous adventure, not gleeful sports. Fair mistress Night, if you hold beneath your shadowy canopy any maiden in distress, then call upon my sword for rescue."

"I fear it will not come," replied the musical voice. "You are already pledged. What is this silken scarf upon your left arm?"

"He is sold!" cried a jesting voice near them. "He is sold, and a woman has bought him. Trust him not, lady fair. Your belted Knights are sore deceivers."

"Not I," stoutly returned the Knight, addressing the Harlequin-like figure. "This is but my pledge to an adventure yet to be achieved. It is no bond to any lady love."

"I trust you not, Sir Knight," rejoined the merry Queen of Night. "I have the eyes of a seeress; I can read the 'Forget me not' so deftly hidden within that silken badge."

The Knight gave a start of surprise, till his armor rung with a sudden clash of silvery sound. His keen eyes sought in vain to read the face of the veiled lady.

"How know you that?" he cried. "You cannot read what lies on the inside of this knotted ribbon?"

"Aha! sir lover! Have I touched you there?" and a merry laugh came from the veiled lips. "You know not all my power. I will read a chapter from your past."

Silken used his hand, and bent her face over the lines upon his palm, as if eagerly studying them.

Will Wildfire, the Thoroughbred.

"I see," she said, in a low tone, "a great course of people, the gleaming surface of a broad river, two slender boats flying beneath the forms of vigorous rowers! They reach their goal! Shouts from a thousand voices greet the winner! He turns his boat lightly to the land! A bouquet of flowers falls from the cliff to his feet! He presses it gratefully to his lips, as he lifts his eyes toward the unknown giver. But she has gone, and only the flowers, tied with 'Forget me not' ribbon remain in his hands."

Her voice grew low and earnest as she repeated these words with the gravity of a sibyl.

"Are you a witch?" he exclaimed. "Or no—you were there! You know me! I must see your face."

"Hold," she continued, "I am not yet done. There is more here. I see foes surrounding you, dangers threatening you. You will have to pass through many perils. You must be wise, brave and discreet."

"Those are the virtues of a Knight," he replied. "I fear no foes. And now shall I not see the charming face which you keep so cruelly veiled?"

"I have warned you to be discreet," she answered. "You must not know me. There are reasons why a knowledge of my face might double your dangers."

"I know you," the Knight rejoined, with a laugh of triumph. "I saw the face of the lady from whom came this silken scarf. I can see the same eyes burning through that starry veil."

"Trust not a woman's eyes," sung a gay voice near them. "They are deceivers ever. Beware Sir Knight, or the Lurli will have thee in her toils."

The Knight cast his eyes toward the singer. It was a bright, merry-faced maiden, dressed in the costume of the peasant girls of the Rhine, her flaxen hair dressed with clusters and leaves of the vine.

It was but a momentary glance, but when he turned again to his companion she had disappeared. In vain he sought to pierce with his eyes the wandering throng; no trace of her was visible. She had been suddenly swallowed up in a maelstrom of living forms.

"Trust her not, she is fooling thee," sung the merry German maiden. "Turn hither, Sir Knight; only the blind follow the fleeing. Turn hither, and heed not the false and fitful."

With a gesture of disappointment the Knight turned toward the singer. He was evidently vexed that he had not penetrated the disguise of the veiled sibyl. Was she indeed the lady of the cliff, he asked himself doubtfully.

Suddenly throwing off this momentary disquietude, he seized the hand of the pretty German girl, calling out merrily:

"There starts the music again. Let us join in the dance. It is for the young and the gay; for the grape-blossom of the Rhine."

"And for the *wildfire* of the Delaware," returned the girl, with a significant look.

He started again in surprise.

"Does all Philadelphia know me?" he asked himself. "I did not fancy that a boat race would make one so famous."

Will Wildfire—whom his knightly disguise had failed to conceal—led his new partner, nothing loth, to where new circles were whirling in the giddy mazes of the waltz.

In a moment they two were in the heart of the dance, his linked armor yielding a tinkling sound at every step upon the elastic floor. He was an easy and graceful dancer, while his partner, whose face still wore its gay smile, responded in perfect accord to his every movement.

The eyes of the lookers-on were soon drawn to this new pair, as the most graceful dancers upon the floor, following them as they whirled round and round, in the ardent circles of the waltz, Will's armor ringing in silvery response to every step.

The smile passed from his partner's face. It gave way to an eager, flushed look, a warm, intense expression, as the excitement of the dance set the blood flowing in pulsing currents through her veins.

The music grew quicker, the waltz more rapid. Round and round went the giddy circles, intertwining like a living web of rainbowed light and eye-enranging motion. Round and round, while hearts beat and eyes gleamed with excitement, and the music seemed to grow mad with the same intensity that possessed the dancers.

And suddenly the instruments ceased. A strange silence fell. The dancing circle as suddenly broke asunder, and in a moment more was mingled in the strolling mass, quick breaths and flashing eyes alone remaining of the late giddy motion of the waltz.

Will walked away with his partner, gayly conversing.

"Where shall I take you?" he asked.

"Here, to the left, are my friends. And now, Sir Knight, may I speak one word in your ear?"

"Two. Twenty. Two hundred," Will gallantly replied. "Whatever you deign to say I shall be happy to hear."

"Beware the Queen of Night," came in whispered accents in his attentive ear.

"But why?" he asked surprised. "Who is this Queen of Night? You know her. Tell me who she is."

"Ha! I see you are in her toils already. Beware! beware! Take care! take care! Trust her not, she is fooling thee!"

The voice, suddenly resuming its merry tone, broke into song on these last words, while the light form moved away from his side, in a dancing, gliding motion. Will stood with a sort of dazed look, watching her as she sank and disappeared into the dense throng. He felt no desire to follow her. And yet, there was something very attractive in her bright young face; something more than the simple

German peasant she represented; something of deeper, fuller expression, of higher culture, of more polished address.

Will felt instinctively that she was playing a part in her dress which she could not play in her soul; that there was more in her than appeared on the surface.

He walked through and through the room, listening to and taking part in the merry talk and laughing jests, and occasionally indulging in a gay flirtation, or in a mocking banter, with some of the lively merrymakers on the floor.

"I wonder what has become of my friends?" he asked himself, moving toward a portion of the room that was comparatively deserted.

Here, with a sense of pleasure, he caught sight again of the "Queen of Night." She was standing in what seemed earnest conversation with a slenderly-built figure, dressed in the costume of a courtier of the Elizabethan age.

The sound made by his armor attracted her attention, and she turned with a quick motion toward him, extending her hands with a gesture of appeal.

"Protection, Sir Knight-errant," she said, with more of earnestness than of jest in her tone. "It is your duty to render aid to the distressed. I crave your protection from this discourteous courtier."

"It is yours," Will warmly replied. "Your foes are mine; and he who assails you shall have me to answer to."

She glided away, but Will felt a warm grasp of her hand as she did so, given perhaps in response to the earnest meaning in his voice.

"It is one thing to insult a woman. It is another to face a man," was Will's stern address to the masked figure before him.

"You had better take warning, my steel-coated friend, and not meddle with me," came back, in biting sarcasm. "There are those ready to take up every quarrel, and who get more kicks than half-pence for their pains."

"Bravely said," answered Will, haughtily. "Are you ready to administer the kicks? Or to defend yourself in any other mode?"

"I will defend myself in my own time, and in my own way," was the fierce reply. "And I am not to be browbeaten by any bravo, or meddling ruffian."

"Bravo in your teeth!" cried Will, in an angry tone. "And if you want further warrant for defiance, here it is for you."

He struck his foe a light blow in the face, delivered with the back of his hand, yet with sufficient force to loosen the mask and tear it from its fastenings.

"Aha!" exclaimed Will, in astonishment, as the falling mask revealed the countenance before him. "So *she* is you, Mark Preston! It is you who oblige ladies to seek protection from insult!"

"Yes, it is I," was the bitter answer. "And I know you, Will Wildfire, in spite of your masked face. You can safely dare me to a battle with fists, or any such work of roughs. But I do my fighting with other weapons; and I will be even with you yet for this blow."

His face was purple with anger, as he picked up his fallen mask and turned to walk away.

"Whenever you will and wherever you will," answered his opponent, hotly. "By fair means or foul. I fear you not, and am ready to meet you in any treachery you attempt to practice."

Will haughtily walked away from the spot of the encounter, and mingled again with the mass, seeking, but in vain, for the vanished form of the "Queen of Night."

CHAPTER IV.

IN THE OLD TENANT HOUSE.

We must now take ourselves to a locality outside the city limits, though in its immediate vicinity. It is a rambling old mansion, to which additions at successive periods have given a disconnected, yet picturesque appearance. At one extremity the ivy of a century's growth mantles and conceals the original wall, while at the other the brand of newness marks the work of a very recent addition.

It is one of those edifices which have grown as a tree grows, by successive branches, and which display the tastes and needs of generations of occupants.

The grounds around it are partly pleasure parterres and partly farm lands, the latter spreading out widely beyond the road in front, while the former extend around the house, and down to the narrow and winding waters of a stream, known as Darby Creek, which borders the estate to the north.

Such is Wildflower Hall, as it is known to the people of the vicinity. It is now the heritage of Will Wildfire, who has but lately succeeded to the estate by the death of his peculiar old uncle, the news of whose decease in a foreign land had reached America, shortly before the opening of our story.

The brightly colored October woods are lending their charm to the surrounding landscape, as Will, and a group of his friends, appear from the interior of the house, and stand smoking and chatting on the porch in front.

"A mighty clever drop you have made," remarked Ben Hunty, who had become a warm friend of Will's. "I know an uncle or two that I would be willing to spare, if I could exchange them for a relic of the old times like this."

"And not wet many handkerchiefs with tears, eh, Ben?" asked Pierce Browning, an indolent-looking fellow, of gigantic build. "But it is not every chap that is born to good luck.—Is that one of your friends Will? He looks as if he wanted to know you again."

"I am not anxious to return the compliment," answered Will, carelessly.

These words referred to a person of somewhat sinister aspect, who had stopped at the gate in pass-

ing, and was looking at Will with a peculiar intensity of expression.

"Do you allow shooting about here?" asked Hunty. "I would like to go gunning after such game as that, if it flew around my preserves."

"Oh, I suppose it is some one of the neighbors, who wants to get acquainted," remarked Will carelessly, turning his back to the road, and puffing a cloud of smoke from his cigar.

After a moment the man walked on, disappearing behind the thick bushes that bordered the road.

"This way, boys, if you want to see the place," said Will, leading down the steps to the porch. "People brag about the grounds of Wildflower Hall; but for my part I remember very little about them."

They walked around for an hour or two, finding much to admire, and some little to criticize. The winding, bushy walks, and the magnificent trees that here and there rose in green open spaces, led to a beautiful declivity, by whose foot wound in a graceful curve the bright waters of the creek, the ground being terraced down to its banks.

But there was one thing they failed to see, and this was that a pair of sinister eyes followed their every movement, and that a lurking form glided from bush to bush, as if with no friendly intent. There was some hidden treachery in the air, of which the jesting young men remained in careless unconsciousness.

"It's mighty fine," said Pierce, in indolent praise, as he blew the smoke in clouds from his lips. "But not half so pretty as the field of a billiard board. Let us get back to the house. I don't believe I am given to nature. I would sooner get my feet up on your porch railing and talk."

"Or meditate on your sins, I suppose," laughed Hunty.

"Sins!" echoed Will. "He has no sins, except a love of cigar smoke, and a weakness for pretty girls. And there is nothing in that needing repentance."

"He has the sin of size and laziness," remarked another of the party. "Come, let us relieve our giant of the vexation of walking."

Pierce laughed good-naturedly at these remarks.

"Go on," he said, turning toward the house. "It amuses you, and it don't hurt me."

"I must beg you to excuse me for a few minutes," explained Will. "I have a short errand down this way, at my tenant house. Make yourselves entirely at home; I will join you soon."

"Had you not better have company?" asked Pierce. "It might be dangerous for a new-fledged chap like you to wander alone through these desert wilds."

"If I fail to return in due time you can send out exploring parties, or drag the creek for me," laughed Will in reply. "It would be positively cruel to draw our friend Pierce away now, with that lazy yawn on his lips."

Will turned aside with a gay laugh, making his way toward the open fields, while the remainder of the party strolled slowly back toward the house.

And the lurking form which had been tracking them step by step, and had approached close enough to hear these last words, now glided rapidly away, masking himself behind bushes and bordering hedges. In a few minutes he had regained the road, showing the face of the man who had been lately observed watching Will from the gate.

Here he was joined by two other men.

"It's all boozy," he cried, in hasty accents. "The cat's got her nose in the bag. We've only got to pull the string. Track's the word, lads, and let out's the style."

The next moment they hurried rapidly away.

Meanwhile Will, all unconscious of these significant movements, was slowly making his way through the grounds, his eyes wandering here and there, as he took in the general features of his new estate.

Passing through a wicket gate he entered the open fields, and walked toward a low brick house, which stood on an elevated spot by the roadside, about a quarter of a mile distant.

"I hope it is in fair order for the new tenant," he said to himself. "But if it has been empty so long I suppose there will be some repairing necessary."

All was quiet and forlorn about the empty tenant-house as he approached. The wild-grown grass and weeds, the dusty and desolate aspect of the place, gave him a sensation of distaste.

"I think I will change all that," he remarked, trying the door, which opened to his touch.

"They might have kept it locked, at any rate," he muttered. "It would make a glorious retreat for tramps."

The interior of the house was dimly silent, as he walked through the empty rooms, in some of which a few articles of furniture remained.

There was something so dismal and solitary, and so distressingly shadowy and silent, about the closed house, that he felt himself involuntarily wishing he had brought his friends with him.

"It would be enough to give an owl a fit of the blues," he muttered, as he ascended to the upper floor and walked through its several rooms.

Yet there were noises here which he had not heard below—peculiar creakings, as if the house was settling bodily downward; and sounds as of suppressed breathing, as though the ghost of some former inmate was present yet in the empty rooms.

"Ugh!" said Will, with a shiver, as he opened the door of a back room.

He hastened across the floor and threw open a window, letting some light into the damp apartment. Some pieces of furniture remained in this room—a table and two or three chairs.

Will seated himself on one of the latter, and looked critically round.

"I hardly think there is much needed besides the dusting-brush and the broom, with the aid of a little sunlight," he soliloquized.

But now the creaking noises suddenly increased. They rose into steps, into a rushing sound that made Will start in surprise.

In an instant the room was violently invaded, not by ghosts, but by living men. Will leaped to his feet as the intruders sprung upon him. A single glance told him that there were three of them. A quick blow from his clenched fist stretched one of them prostrate at his feet.

But they had taken him too much by surprise for any effective resistance. The other two leaped upon him and hampered his limbs in their grasp; one—a small-built man—springing like a cat upon his back, while the other seized him in front.

Another feature of the case had been caught by Will's quick eyes. They were all closely masked.

All this had taken but a second. He struggled violently, but three to one, and that one at a disadvantage, was no fair odds. The man he had floored rose at once, and in an instant had drawn and bound his arms behind him.

The next moment he was forced into a chair, one of the brigands presenting a pistol at his head, while the others tightly bound him to the chair.

"Try to call for help, and I will send a bullet through you," hissed the man in his ear.

"What does this outrage mean?" asked Will, hotly. "If it is my purse you want, take it and go. Cowardly rascals, you dared not give me a fair show."

"We want something more than your purse," said the man, sarcastically. "Though I won't mind taking a little remembrance out of that. Just a slight stake you owe me."

He extracted the purse from the young man's pocket, as he spoke, and examined its contents. He carefully separated a part of these, and replaced the remainder, throwing the purse upon the table.

"Well? What next?" asked Will, with great command of his temper.

"Only a trifle of satisfaction," returned the speaker of the villainous. "You have paid me for my trouble. But I owe you a little debt which I want to pay you."

"I forgive you the debt," remarked Will, with an effort to appear at his ease.

"But I don't forgive you," the man fiercely replied, making a sign to his companions.

In a minute more they had torn off the boy's coat and vest, and dragged down his shirt, revealing the white skin of his back in its naked lustre and muscular roundness.

The speaker now handed his pistol to one of the others, and drew from under his coat a short, thick-lashed whip.

"A blow for a blow! That is the measure of the Jewish law," he satirically said, as he drew this cruel-looking weapon between his hands.

Will looked, with an involuntary shiver, on the whip in the hands of this stalwart villain. He next looked at the pistol, held within six inches of his temple.

"All right," he remarked, setting his teeth grimly. "It is your day now. But mine will come. You have your day out of the three hundred and sixty-five; it will be odd if I can't have mine out of the remainder. I warn you in advance that if you strike me with that whip you shall bitterly rue it."

A scornful laugh came from the man's lips. He drew back his hand, the lash whizzed a moment in the air, and came down with a cruel thud on the white flesh beneath it, cutting a deep red swath.

"One," said Will, without a groan, though his teeth were clenched together like a vice.

"Two," "Three."

The whip again and again descended, cutting a red welt with each blow.

"That's one for each of you. I will remember the debt I owe you," and the brave boy had a look upon his face that boded ill for his tormentors when his turn should come.

"Our debt is not yet paid," cried the man, again raising the cruel lash.

CHAPTER V.

A FAIR EQUESTRIENNE.

"Now I didn't want to stir up our friend Wildfire's pride," remarked Pierce Browning, "but I will say, between ourselves, that he has a deuced pretty place here. If he wants to exchange I'll trade with him, even up."

He sat with his chair tilted back at a dangerous angle, his feet on the rail of the porch, and his hat drawn down over his eyes. The smoke curled in lazy wreaths from his lips as he spoke.

"I think Will ought to know that there's such an offer open to him," replied Harry Waters, another of the party. "I expect he'd jump for it as a monkey jumps for a peanut."

"Or a cat for a bowl of milk," suggested Huntly, laughing. "I am surprised to see such an instance of self-sacrifice."

"Oh! I've spent all my life giving myself away to my friends," rejoined Pierce, with a resigned air. "But, don't say much to Will about it. It might make him dissatisfied with his country farm."

"Which isn't his in good earnest yet," suggested Harry.

"Hey! what's that?" cried Pierce. "Not his? Why, is there any break in the title?"

"His uncle died abroad, you know. And the will was found among his effects. It has not yet reached America, and our boy is only holding on the strength of a telegram."

"A telegram?"

"Yes. The dead man's papers were examined by a confidential friend, who accompanied him. He

has telegraphed the fact that Will is made full heir of Wildflower Hall. He will be in this country soon with the papers."

"Well!" cried Pierce. "He's only an heir by telegraph then? If I were in his place I wouldn't spread myself too much. Suppose there should show up some flaw in the will; or a later one come to light?"

"It would be blamed awkward for Will," replied Huntly. "But it won't turn out so. He is too open-handed and whole-souled a fellow for bad luck to chase in that way. Luck can't turn on a chap that handles an oar like him."

"That's so, Ben. I wasn't at the race. But they say he dismounted you."

"Hardly," answered Huntly, dryly. "I thought I had a greenhorn, and got bit: that was all."

"And could have beaten him, of course, if you had only seen his game."

"I don't say that," rejoined Huntly, a little angry at the concealed sarcasm of Pierce's words.

He rose and paced the porch somewhat impatiently.

"What in the world keeps him?" he said. "He has been gone the big end of an hour."

"Here he comes!" cried Harry. "Or somebody who is in a great hurry."

He referred to the sound of a horse's hoofs, which now rose distinctly upon the still air. It seemed to be approaching at full speed.

"That comes up the road; not down," remarked Huntly. "It is not from Will's direction."

The horse came momentally nearer and nearer. Huntly, who was standing at the end of the porch, turned his eyes down the road.

"Hallo! It's a woman!" he cried. "But isn't she a glowing old rider? The horse is making his best tracks, and she sits the saddle like a centaur."

All but Pierce rose at these words, anxious to observe this bold equestrienne. But the lazy giant remained seated, apparently more interested in his cigar than anything else mundane.

The long striding black horse thundered up to the front of the mansion. Instead of passing, however, it was drawn up to a full stop by the strong hand of its rider, whose disengaged hand was extended with a beckoning gesture to those standing on the porch.

Ben Huntly hurried down toward the gate. His eyes were fixed with surprise and admiration on the features of the fair horsewoman, who sat her horse like a statue of grace, flushed, and doubly beautified by the warmth of exercise. He could not but acknowledge to himself that she was superbly beautiful, with her fresh young face, her red, pouting lips, and the blue luster that burned in her eyes. A wealth of soft, brown hair, loosened by the violence of the ride, drooped gracefully over her temples, adding a new, unstudied charm to her maidenly beauty.

The horse quivered and palpitated beneath her stately form, but she sat unmoved, her only expression one of excitement and anxiety.

"Mr. Wildfire!" she cried out hastily, as Huntly drew near. "Is he in the house? I must see him at once."

"I am sorry to say he is not," replied Huntly. "But he will return in a few minutes. Will you not ride in and wait?"

"No, no!" she anxiously exclaimed. "Excuse my abruptness; but where has he gone? There must be no delay."

"He walked over the farm, toward his tenant house."

"He is in danger! great danger!" was her excited answer. "Foes who have sworn to injure him are even now upon his track! He may be in their toils even while we speak! I have ridden here to warn him. Will you not at once follow him to this house? He may be in need of your aid."

"Of course," rejoined Huntly. "If the danger is as real as you say. But, how can you know of the designs of his enemies?"

"It is enough that I know. It matters not how," she impatiently answered. "Will you go to his rescue? or must I in person?"

"Of course I will go!" cried the young man. "I would go through fire and water for him."

"And—one word more," she hesitatingly spoke. "I beg that you will not describe me to any one. There are reasons—I am myself in danger."

"Trust to me," rejoined Huntly earnestly, pleased to be made the confidant of so beautiful a woman. "And I will instantly hasten to seek him."

"Thanks! A thousand thanks!"

The drawn rein was loosened. The impatient black horse sprang off in eager flight. In a moment more the beautiful vision had disappeared, only the distant thud of hoofs remaining to tell of her existence.

Huntly looked after her for a minute, and then hastened back to the house.

"Who is with me?" he asked. "I have been warned that Will Wildfire is in great danger. He may be now in the hands of his enemies. Who is with me to the rescue?"

"That's a mighty thin story," replied Pierce, incredulously.

"Thin or not, I am pledged to prove it. What say you, Harry, are you with me?"

"You bet!" cried the active young man, springing down the steps.

"I am on no such wild goose business," remarked Pierce indolently. "The girl is making game of you."

"Very well. We will prove that," and Huntly turned away with a movement of vexation.

"Oh! here, my boy, don't be going off angry," exclaimed Pierce. "You had better take this with you. You may have some hobgoblins to shoot."

He flung toward Huntly a small revolver, which he had drawn from a rear pocket.

Huntly deftly caught it.

"Thanks," he said. "A pistol is often of more use than an extra man."

The next instant the two were off, hastening to the gate, and down the road toward the house that stood prominent on a rising ground in the distance.

The doubts which they still entertained, and which had been deepened by Pierce's distrust, were suddenly dispelled on entering the door of this house by the tones of voices within it, followed by a peculiar sound, whose character they could not comprehend.

Meanwhile, in the room up-stairs, the scene which we have already described was being enacted.

The bared back of the young athlete, with its pearl white skin cruelly cut and bleeding from the fierce lash, appealed in vain to the rancor of his enemies. The pistol at his temples still threatened him with death if he should seek to give an alarm, while the lash was again lifted in the air, in the strong hands of his implacable foe.

But Will sat with the stoicism of an old Roman. He had nerves himself to the infliction, and would have died rather than let these ruffians see him flinch from pain.

"Go on!" he said sternly. "But remember that every blow shall be bitterly revenged. Think not that you can hide yourself from me behind your masks. I will find you, and will fully repay you for this indignity."

A bitter, disdainful laugh came from the lips of the burly ruffian.

"When your day comes," he said. "It is our day now. Why do you not flinch, blast you? Why do you not beg to be released, or cry for help?"

"Because I would die first," replied Will stoutly, though his young heart swelled as though it would burst its bonds.

"You may call. I hardly think aid will come," returned the ruffian, again lifting the whip, which he had lowered during this dialogue.

"You lie! you infernal hound! whoever you are!" thundered fierce accents from behind the locked door, which was grasped and violently shaken at this instant.

The ruffian dropped his lash, and looked in alarm at his friends, the unmasked portion of their faces visibly pallid in the light that entered through the open window.

The door was now violently struck and shaken.

"Open or we will break it down!" was the cry.

"Shall I settle him?" asked the man with the pistol.

"No, fool! Do you want to hang for your pains?" cried the first speaker, snatching the pistol from his hands. "Here are stairs. We must make tracks at once. That door will not stand a minute."

The smaller member of the trio, who had kept utterly silent during this scene, was the first to take this hint, springing like a cat for the stairs. He was followed hastily by his companions.

"Never mind the door!" shouted Will, as the blows on it redoubled. "Down-stairs with you! They are escaping! Head them off, and shoot them down like dogs if you cannot capture them."

As he spoke, however, the poorly-fastened door gave way, and was flung violently open, the forms of Ben Huntly and Harry Waters rushing into the room.

"My God!" cried the latter in horror, as he observed Will's condition. "Look here, Ben, what the devils have done!"

"Never mind me!" exclaimed Will. "After them! Don't let them escape!"

The sound of the slammed doors below was heard. Huntly ran across the room and threw up the sash of the open window.

The next instant the crack of a pistol sounded, as he fired at the fugitives, who were running hastily toward a strip of woodland, about a hundred yards away.

His shot was followed by a quick leap back. A pistol cracked without, the bullet passing the spot where he had just stood, and burying itself in the wall behind him.

During this interchange of shots, Harry Waters had drawn a knife, and released Will from his bonds with quick strokes of the keen blade.

The young man sprung to his feet, a revengeful light filling his face. He eagerly snatched the pistol from Huntly's hand, and ran to the window, which the latter had been dubious about again approaching.

A quick aim, and a bullet again cut the air toward the fugitives. But they were too far distant for a sure aim, and in a minute more buried themselves in the bushy borders of the wood.

"The devils!" cried Huntly, "they have cut you fearfully!"

"If they had cut me to pieces I would follow them!" exclaimed Will, springing for the stairs.

CHAPTER VI.

HOW PIERCE BROWNING CAPTURED THE BRIDGE.

"By the Liverpool steamer of the 10th October," he writes, "said a middle-aged lady, as she ran eyes over a letter sheet which she held open in her hand. "And it is now the 20th. He should be here within a week."

"I hope so," replied her young lady companion. "I am certainly anxious to know what is to be the end of it all."

It was a small apartment, overlooking a narrow street, while the surroundings, and the dresses of the speakers, did not bespeak great wealth. Yet there was about them an air of culture, and a general tastefulness in the whole aspect of the room which spoke of polish and of a high social standing.

The young lady was very pretty, with an arch, genial expression, though her face closely resembled

Will Wildfire the Thoroughbred.

the more sobered countenance of her elder companion.

"Heigh-ho! I am tired enough of this sort of life," she said, indolently playing her fan, and leaning back in her chair with a careless grace. "If some fairy would only put an end to it; or bring an enchanted island along this way."

"Your fairy is coming now—over the seas," was the reply.

"What, he? Big-headed and big-footed Ralph Emerson? He a fairy?" The young lady burst into a merry laugh. "Why, mother, if he was to set that foot of his in fairy land, he would smash a whole city of the dainty creatures at every step."

The mother laughed in response.

"He is a good soul, at all events. That you must acknowledge, Lucille. And he is bringing us a release from this prison of poverty."

"I hope so," replied Lucille, rather dubiously.

She remained lost in thought for a minute, idly playing her fan. A shade of doubt came across her fair brow.

"I do wish that boy was not living so wild a life," she at length said. "If something could only be done to show him the danger of his course."

"I hardly think there can be anything positively bad in him."

"Perhaps not. But bad company is often worse than bad inclinations. You remember how I warned him at the ball at the Academy, when I was playing the pretty peasant girl. That mysterious woman who appeared there as the Queen of Night—I know she is seeking to entrap him in her toils.—If I could but penetrate the hidden mystery of her life!"

"It was strange that Will did not recognize you on that occasion."

"But you know, mother, that he has not seen us for years."

"Why does he not seek us out?" rejoined the mother, with a show of vexation. "I would not have dreamed of his being so neglectful."

"It is the Wildfire blood," answered Lucille. "They pursue but one object at a time. Dissipation has hold of him now. He will follow it until some stronger passion obtains control of him."

"Which will be love, perhaps," said the mother. "That is, if your mysterious woman succeeds in entrapping him.—But see here, child. I have not finished Ralph's letter yet. Here is a postscript."

"Of course. He always puts his most important news in a postscript."

"I will not come at once to Philadelphia," he says. "I have some business of my own to transact at Lancaster, which I must attend to first. I—"

She was suddenly interrupted in her reading by a gust of air, which entered the open window, and caught the letter in an eddy from her loose grasp. The whirling wind whisked it out of the window, and down the street, despite her efforts to catch it.

"Now that is too bad!" she excitedly cried. "There was something else there of importance, but I only got a glimpse of it. Run after the letter, Lucille."

The young lady had already sprung up, dropping her fan. In a minute more she was in the street, eagerly chasing the flying letter, her golden hair loosened and extended behind her till she seemed a second Atalanta.

But the wind was faster than she. She could see the light sheet flying like a winged creature ahead. She saw it finally descend into the grasp of an impish little black boy, who had preceded her in the chase.

Instead of returning it to her, however, he looked round with a laugh of mocking triumph upon his face, and then darted like an arrow down a side street.

Hastily capturing her escaped hair Lucille turned back, a look of great discomposure upon her face.

"It is gone, mother," she cried, in a tone of intense vexation. "It has fallen into the hands of that little black imp, who has been hanging around here like a spy, and whom we suspect to be employed by Mark Preston for some unknown purpose."

"Now that is too bad, Lucille. It may be ruinous for Mark Preston to get that letter. You know his unscrupulous character. If he should meet unsuspecting Ralph Emerson in Lancaster, and by some trick defraud him of his papers, particularly of old Harry Wildfire's will—"

"Something must be done!" exclaimed Lucille, with great energy. "Will Wildfire must be warned of the danger.—I must go to Lancaster myself.—If that will is destroyed, this villain may come in for the estate, under the old will."

"And we be robbed of our legacy," added the mother.

"You did not catch the remainder of the postscript?"

"No. It was something about the papers. He would leave them in the hands.—The letter disappeared when my eyes had got that far."

"I hope it may be in good hands," exclaimed Lucille, seating herself at a desk, and commencing to write energetically.

"I am going to warn cousin Will against his enemy," she said. "But, we have too much at stake to trust all to him. I must go to Lancaster myself, on the 20th, and be on the look-out for Ralph Emerson."

She continued to write vigorously.

But we must return to the lazy giant, Pierce Browning, whom we left indolently enjoying himself on the porch of Wildflower Hall.

He had lit another cigar, and was puffing the smoke in clouds into the fresh October air.

"Was there ever the like of those ridiculous boys?" he soliloquized, letting a waving circle of

vapor ascend from his lips. "Off like spaniels on a dead scent. I hope Ben Huntly won't put a bullet in himself or some of his friends. It was rather risky to trust that hair-trigger pistol in his awkward hands."

Pierce ran his hand through his abundant hair, and sat musing, holding his cigar idly between his fingers.

"A deuced handsome woman that was! And, Jupiter, couldn't she ride?" was his next reflection. "It is lucky I have such long-range eyes. I made her out from the porch here, as clearly as Huntly did from the gate. It's blamed odd what brought her here. I wonder if there is any bottom to it, or if the thing is a clean sell?"

He got up and strode the porch rather restlessly, his heavy tread making the whole structure shake.

"Oh, well, there's enough anyhow! There's Ben Huntly with arms like steel bars; and Harry Waters as spry as a cat. Trust them to give a good account of themselves against any fair odds."

He resumed his seat, and sat for a minute or two, musing and smoking.

"Hang it all!" he exclaimed, suddenly, dashing the cigar away as if it had burnt him. "How is it when a thing like this gets into a chap's mind it won't let him alone, but must drag him as if he had team of mules pulling him? It is like being drawn against one's will, by invisible horses."

He got up and stretched his lazy length.

"By thunder! I won't follow the boys to that house," he ejaculated. "It would take the laugh off of them, and put it on me, if there's nothing in this business. But I don't see why I shouldn't take a stroll around through that bit of woodland. A fellow interested in nature, as I am. And a sort of poet, too. Yes, that's it, I want to meditate on my last poem."

With a laugh that seems to come up from the innermost depths of his chest, so deep and full was it, Pierce turned away from the porch, and walked with a decisive step toward the woodland in question.

This wooded strip bordered the creek, coming nearly to the garden wall, and extending in a long curve along the water-course until far beyond the tenant house, which it nearly approached.

A narrow lane cut through its center, extending downward to where a slight wooden bridge crossed the creek, too narrow for any but foot passengers.

Pierce walked through the rustling leaves with which the ground was well carpeted, the October frosts having partly denuded the trees, and left an open view down the vistas of the wood.

As he proceeded, under cover of the clustered trees, the elevated tenant house, which had been hidden by a clump of low bushes, became visible to him. And his attention was particularly caught by a commotion which broke out at that moment. A group of men ran from the house, toward the shelter of the wood. At the same instant a face appeared at an open window. Crack after crack of pistol-shots resounded, the first face at the window being replaced by another.

"May I be everlasting confounded!" he said, energetically, "if there isn't business afoot there! And if I didn't know those faces at the window, then my eyes don't carry as far as I thought. These chaps that are on the run want a stop put to their little game, that's clear. And it looks to me as if I was posted here to do it."

He stretched his huge frame as if he thought that three common men to one of him was only a fair match.

"Where can I head them off?" he asked himself, thoughtfully. "Ha! I have it! The bridge I saw below here! I'll bet a horse that is the spot they are making for. Ho! for the bridge. The first man there is the best."

He started to run through the woods with a speed of which his size did not give promise, not troubling himself to run round bushes, but dashing through thick and thin like an elephant let loose.

The ground declined rapidly toward the bridge, the wood opening out somewhat on this declivity.

As Pierce reached this point, he saw the forms of three men, on the other side of the open lane, running at full speed for the same passageway.

One of these—a slight-built, agile form—was several yards in advance of the others. They saw Pierce at the same instant, and redoubled their efforts.

But there was no indolence in the giant now. He put on his best paces, coming down the hill in successive leaps, which seemed to carry him twenty feet at each jump.

"Hold, villains! Hold, rascals!" came from him, like puffs from a steam whistle.

But, there was no idea of holding in their minds. The agile figure in front shot ahead like an arrow, side by side with his mighty competitor. The opening to the bridge was reached. He darted into it just ahead of Pierce, and barely beyond the reach of his grasping hands.

Across the bridge they dashed, the fugitive in advance.

Suddenly giving up the chase, Pierce tried to stop and meet the remaining two villains. But it was not easy, in an instant, to overcome the impetus of his flight.

Ere he could bring himself to rest and turn to face them, they both sprung upon him, grasping him tightly in their arms, and making strenuous efforts to hurl him headlong over the sides of the bridge, into the deep pool of water that lay below.

But they calculated without their host. Pierce's bulk was not made up of fat, but of muscle, and his antagonists could no more hold him than they could have held a lion.

With a mighty effort he wrenched loose from their

grasp, and turned to face them, his deep breast heaving with the violence of the exertion, and his flashing eyes full of the spirit of the combat.

"So, my hearties, I am of the notion that you've caught a Tartar," he cried, grasping each of them by the throat, and paying no more heed to the blows which they rained upon him than if they had been falling feathers.

"You want a little of the fun taken out of you," he exclaimed, giving the slighter of the two men a vast impulse with his right hand, that hurled him over the unprotected side of the bridge into the deep water below.

With a quick surge to the other side the more burly ruffian was hurled headlong into the same cool October pool.

"Where are they?" called the voice of Ben Huntly, who had just appeared on the hill. "Gone in for a free bath. You can fish them out if you want them," Pierce coolly replied.

CHAPTER VII.

WHAT CAME TO THE CONSPIRATORS.

An hour afterward the form of the most agile of the three confederates appeared upon a lonely part of the Darby Road, some three miles' from the city.

"By the blazes!" cried Mark Preston, for the unmasked face now showed who he was. "If those two clumsy-footed fools have been captured I pity them. I would not be in Will Wildfire's hands, in that lonely wood, just now, for a barrel of silver."

He looked apprehensively about him, as if not quite sure that the pursuit was over.

"I'd give something to be in the city," he continued. "Here's a three miles walk before me; or a half hour's wait for a street car—which I can't venture on just now. Some of those devils may be still on my track."

He turned with a quick start, as the thud of a horse's hoofs rung from the road below him. In dread that this was one of his foes, he had already sprung to the roadside, and was on the point of climbing the fence into the adjoining field, when he caught sight of the animal, just rounding a sharp bend in the road.

"Well, I hardly think I will run from a woman," he said to himself, as a tall black horse, mounted by the graceful figure of a lady rider, came rapidly toward him.

He looked again at the approaching equestrienne, and cried, with an accent of joy:

"Fortune favors the brave! If it is not Clara, and her favorite black, then I never saw them.—So, my lady, you are out for an excursion, eh? Very well; I will relieve you of your responsibility."

A look of bitter malignity came upon his face. No one would have recognized him now, in his rough dress, and sinister aspect of face, for the oppish exquisite which he usually appeared. Evidently Mark Preston could play two parts.

He stationed himself in the center of the road as the black horse came near.

"Will you be kind enough to halt?" he loudly cried. "I have a few words for you."

The lady looked apprehensively at this threatening figure, and seemed inclined to give reins to her horse and run him down.

"Oh! it's no tramp," he exclaimed. "I think you might know me, Clara. And I have an idea that you may find it to your advantage to obey me."

A shudder shook the lady's frame. Her face grew pallid as marble. She drew up the trotting horse, but with an air of unwillingness. Evidently she did not dare to rebel against his command.

He caught the bridle of the uneasy steed, firmly holding him, and looking up with malignant triumph into her pale face.

"So, my lady," he said sarcastically, "you are out on a pleasure excursion, eh? I would like you to explain what brings you around this way."

"My inclination," she replied, shortly and coldly.

"There was something else besides inclination," he remarked suspiciously. "By Heaven, if I thought you were meddling with my work.—But you dare not."

"It is no matter what I dare or dare not," she exclaimed. "Release my horse. I will not stand here to parley with, and be insulted by you."

"I am not quite ready yet, madam," he sharply responded. "You will be kind enough to dismount, immediately. I have need of this horse. You can get back to the city by the cars."

"What, Mark Preston!" she hotly cried. "You would not be such a brute as to—"

"Get down at once!" he interrupted, in a fierce tone. "I am not much given to bandying words, as you know. I must have this horse."

"But I?" she said in distress. "And in my riding habit? Oh! you cannot be so cruel!"

"Deuce take it, madam, what a pothor you are making about a trifile!" he impatiently cried. "Take off your riding-skirt; or tuck it up; I don't care how. I must have this horse; that's the long and short of it!"

A hot flush of anger came into the face of the fair rider.

"You shall not have the horse!" was her stern response. "Loose that bridle, sir, instantly!"

"Hallo! you are going to rebel, then, my lady Clara?" with a gesture of surprise and contempt.

"Perhaps you forget whom you are dealing with? I am not ready to release the bridle."

"Then take the whip!" she exclaimed, in hot anger.

At the same instant she brought the lash down with a sharp cut on his hand. With an exclamation of pain he loosened his hold, the restless, trampling horse at once breaking away.

"You shall be sorry for this!" was his furious ejaculation.

Will Wildfire, the Thoroughbred.

"I cannot be more sorry than for ever having seen you," she replied, turning her face toward him, beautiful in the flush of anger and the flashing sparkle of the kindled eyes. "You cannot make me more unhappy than you have done; and you shall not make me a slave to your whims."

She waited for no reply. The impatient horse thundered off at a quick gallop toward the city, leaving him alone in the road, his face full of hatred and astonishment.

"So! she is turning under my foot!" came in grinding accents from his lips. "Does she think I escape me so easily?"

He started to walk toward the city, following with angry eyes the lessening form of the black steed, until it disappeared from view at a curve of the road far ahead.

There was deep venom in the fierce oath that came from his lips, as he pulled down his cap over his brows to avoid the rays of the lowering sun, and strode onward along the dusty road.

He had proceeded about a mile in this manner, when he was overtaken by a street-car, of the half-hour line that ran to Darby from the city.

An hour more had passed when Mark Preston appeared in West Spruce street, and entered a house situated upon the avenue.

He was met just within the door by a mischievous-looking mite of a black boy, his eyes like two fragments of chalk set in charcoal, but sparkling with the luster of delight.

"I'se got some'at, Mars Preston!" he ejaculated, with an impish laugh. "I'se done got some'at. Ain't been scootin' roun' Missy Maynard's house jest nuffin'. Oh, hoopee! but ain't I got some'at!"

"The deuce you have!" replied Mark, to this unexpected outbreak. "What in the universe has the grinning hound got?"

"Be wind jest puffed um down de street, an' I etched um. An' oh, my-eel! didn't de young gal scoot arter um! But Pete was *dar*!"

The boy broke into a dance of delight, as he held up a sheet of foreign-looking paper.

"What is it, boy? A letter?"

"S'pec' so. It's all covered over wid pen scratches. S'pose dat's a letter?"

Mark snatched it impatiently from his hand, and opened out the crumpled sheet, whose condition showed evident traces of rough usage.

His eyes became fixed upon it curiously, a look of excitement gradually creeping into his face, as he perused the well-filled sheet.

The little negro stood in a stooping posture, his hands upon his knees, his gleaming eyes fixed eagerly upon the reader's countenance, every expression of which was echoed in the boy's face.

"By Jupiter! but this is a rich find!" cried Mark, in delight, as he finished reading the long epistle. "If we work our cards well, the game will play straight into our hands. You're a jewel, Pete, and I owe you a quarter for this."

"Hoop-eel screamed the boy, flinging his cap to the ceiling, and leaping after it. "Pete known! You bet Pete known! My eye, Mars Preston, if you'd only 'a' see'd de young gal a-runnin' arter um, wid her hair all loose, an' jest de color of a field ob corn-stalks. An' if you'd 'a' see'd Pete grab um, an' scoot! Oh! lawseel but it was de high ole fun!"

The imp danced again with delight, his midnight face distorted with laughter, until his native ugliness was redoubled.

Mark turned hastily away, his eyes again fixed on the captured letter.

"The Germania should be in New York by the 25th, at the furthest," he said. "But of course the papers will advise us of that. I must have my trap set in advance. Ralph Emerson goes straight to Lancaster, and will leave the papers with Justice Esmond while he looks after his own business. Why, he might as well leave them in my hands. I have a notion I can manipulate my friend, the justice."

He walked back into the house, leaving Pete indulging in a series of gymnastic exercises in the marble-floored vestibule.

But, while Mark Preston was falling heir to such a stroke of good luck, his abandoned friends were not faring so finely.

If we return to the woodland adjoining Wildflower Hall, at a somewhat later hour than when we left it, matters in that locality will present themselves to us under a different aspect.

To two smooth-trunked beeches, not far removed from the bridge, were tied the figures of two men, apparently these two companions of Mark Preston. But their unmasked faces now showed more clearly who they really were. The one displayed the features of Luke Lister, the English sport from whom Will had won his wager on the day of the race. The other was the ill-favored countenance which had been seen, not long before, spying through the gate of Wildflower Hall.

And not only their faces, but their backs, were unmasked, they being stripped to the waist; while the remainder of their clothes were streaming wet.

"If I'd had my way," said Pierce Browning sourly, "you might have been left to get out of the creek the best way you could. But as long as we took the trouble to fish you out, I fancy it is our duty to warm you up. You might take cold from this sharp October air."

Will Wildfire stood by with a hard look upon his handsome face. His wounded back was hidden from sight, but the pain showed itself in his set lips.

"Lay on, lads!" he cried, sternly. "My day has come rather sooner than these gentlemen calculated upon."

Ben Huntly and Harry Waters stood beside the

trussed-up ruffians, the first-named holding the whip which had been used on Will's back.

A revengeful light filled their eyes, as they remembered how these ruffians had dealt with their friend. It was with no light weight that the whip in Ben's strong grasp descended upon the bare shoulders of the sport.

"One!" he cried, as a groan of pain came from the ruffian's lips.

Handing the whip to his friend it was brought down with equal force on the shoulders of the second villain, who gave vent to a scream of pain.

But the revengeful purpose of the friends of the tortured youth was not so easily to be set aside.

Blow after blow fell on the quivering flesh beneath them, until it was cruelly scored, and the blood flowing freely from the open wounds.

At every cut a yell came from the lips of the less obdurate ruffian; but nothing more than a groan could be wrung from the set lips of Will's previous tormentor.

"Ten!" cried Pierce Browning. "I think they are sufficiently punished. What say you, Will?"

"Let the hounds go! Ten for three is good measure," returned Will. "When I have given the same generous interest to their employer I fancy I shall feel satisfied. I hardly think these fellows will soon forget the feel of Wildfire justice."

"I have only one thing to say," remarked Pierce Browning, as he loosened the bonds by which the two villains had been confined. "And that is, that if these chaps fall into my hands again they will not get out with a wetting and a whipping. I promise the pair some broken bones on our next meeting of this sort."

And the huge figure of the s'rake gave full warrant that he was able to be as good as his word.

Not a word fell from the lips of the Englishman as his punishment turned away; but his eyes were full of hate. His comrade was rolling on the grass in an agony of pain.

And so they were left, to hide their shame, and drag themselves painfully away from the spot where outrage had so soon and so amply been followed by punishment.

CHAPTER VIII.

A MATCH AT BILLIARDS AND AT FISTS.

"I'd give my cap to know who that woman is," said Will Wildfire, as he and Pierce Browning walked down Chestnut street together. "I hate these confounded mysteries."

"Oh! bless the woman!" replied Pierce, sarcastically. "Don't worry your young head about them. Why a chap of your age can no more expect to understand the ways of women, than a cat can see through the mystery of a mouse-trap. Come, let's go have a set-to at billiards."

"Faith, you're not a patriarch yourself, big as you are," retorted Will. "One would think to hear you that you were a perfect judge of women and their ways."

"I know a thing or two about them," remarked Pierce indifferently.

"Then tell me what this one means. Did you see the rider of the black horse? What was she like?" Huntly pledged himself not to tell me."

"Brown, big eyes," said Pierce. "Aquiline nose. Small mouth. Round, firm chin. Light complexion. Tall, graceful, a regular beauty. Sat her horse like a queen."

"The same, I vow!" cried Will. "At the boatrace I saw that face. She flung me a bouquet from the top of the cliff at Rockland, tied with a 'Forget-me-not' ribbon."

"Which was not intended for you. For how could she know that you were going to take an oar in the race?"

"Blame me if I know," rejoined Will. "Except it was by instinct. Anyhow I have kept the ribbon. Well, I next met her at the ball at the Academy. That is I take it to be the same. And there she falls to warning me, and gets me into a quarrel with Mark Preston, my precious cousin, for insulting her. Finally she appears like a ghost, on a phantom horse, to send me help when I was certainly in bad need of it. I'll be hanged if I wouldn't like to know who she is. We never had any problem at Yale half so puzzling."

"Problems at Yale!" laughed Pierce. "Are you going to compare a question in mathematics with a woman's artifices, or a Latin verb with the wonders of a fair lady's ways? I tell you what, my boy, you have a school before you to which your college was only a playground. You've got to learn the world. But come, how about that match at billiards?"

"See here," continued Will, heedless of the billiard proposition. "I have received an anonymous warning of another kind this morning. From the same hand, I suppose. Read that letter."

Pierce took the open sheet proffered him, and ran his eyes over it, a puzzled expression marking his face.

"This is a queer kind of concern," he at length said. "It is pure Greek to me. Who is Ralph Emerson? What do his papers matter to you?"

"Simply that the papers referred to are those of my dead uncle; one of them the will through which I inherit Wildflower Hall."

"Wheew!" whistled Pierce. "And if this will is lost Mark Preston comes in for the estate?"

"Yes; under a previous will."

"And is Ralph Emerson likely to let himself be wheedled out of his papers?"

"He is a splendid book scholar; but is very poorly posted in the ways of men. A tricky villain like Mark Preston might very easily cheat him out of his charge."

"But this will is proved. His knowledge of it—the witnesses—"

"Might go for nothing unless the will could be produced."

"I tell you what it is," cried Pierce energetically, "that girl, whoever she is, has a level head. You had best lay your track for Lancaster, and take means to circumvent this worthy cousin of yours."

"That is my game for a thousand!" rejoined Will.

"And now, let us have that game of billiards."

The young man laughed at the persistency of his gigantic friend, and made no further objection to the proposed game.

"You are a wise fellow," remarked Will, as he took off his coat in the billiard room. "Billiards is not one of my strong holds. You are going to beat me badly."

"Why, of course I am," answered Pierce laughing. "I only play when I have a sure thing—but, what in the world is this you have hidden under your coat?"

"Only a rod in pickle for a friend of mine," responded Will, a stern look coming upon his face.

He drew forth the identical whip with which two of his enemies had been so severely castigated.

"I am prepared for my next meeting with Mark Preston," he fiercely said. "It is not in the Wildfire blood lightly to forget an injury. He has had his day, let him beware. I shall pay him back with compound interest."

"Why what a bloodthirsty chap you are!" cried Pierce, with affected horror. "A mild-spoken smooth-faced boy like you! I am half afraid to discount you at billiards, for fear you will grow wild for revenge."

"A game is one thing. A battle is another," rejoined Will. "And you have not won yet. Take your cue."

Nor did he find winning such an easy task. Will was not quite without experience at billiards, and his sure eye and steady hand were able aids in the game. Old player as Pierce was he quickly discovered that victory was not to be so easily gained as he had anticipated.

And the Yale student had learned one other lesson necessary to success in life—never to despair at one defeat. Victory comes from perseverance as well as from skill, and as the games went on and he became warmed up to the contest, he pushed his antagonist closer and closer.

"No discounting this game, eh, Pierce?" said Will, as he took the cue, and began the best run he had made yet.

Ten points scored, and Pierce began to grow nervous. Fifteen—he paced the floor impatiently. Sixteen—seventeen—eighteen—and the balls in a corner.

"When in the name of mercy are you going to stop?"

"With the game," answered Will, triumphantly, nursing the balls with a skill he had caught from his opponent.

Nineteen—twenty—and a miss.

"Good!" cried Pierce. "Three points short of game, and he has lost the cue. Here's for my ten run, and out."

A nine run it was, some difficult shots being made. And for the tenth the balls lay in such neat position that Will involuntarily gave up the game, going to the closet for his coat.

"Old birds are not to be caught with chaff, you see," laughed Pierce, so sure of his shot that he struck his ball with the utmost carelessness—and failed.

"Nor young players with miss-cues," Will laughingly retorted, returning to the table, as his vexed opponent threw down his cue in disgust.

The balls lay in an easy position. One—two—three—

"And game!" cried Will. "So much for Yale pluck against Philadelphia skill."

"I'll be hanged if you haven't got the making of a player in you, boy!" cried Pierce, with sudden energy. "Come, try your luck again."

"Not much," rejoined Will. "A cannon-ball never hits twice in the same hole. I don't look for more than one victory, one day, from the remarkable Pierce Browning. Besides, look at the clock! It's far past midnight."

The two players had not noticed the comings and goings of other frequenters of the saloon. They were quite ignorant that they had been observed by sinister eyes, and that a whispering, of no promise to them, had been kept up at the other end of the hall.

Their advent to the street was preceded by that of these whisperers. They quite failed to perceive that they were being dogged by a number of dark forms.

"Here we strike off, my boy," said Pierce, as they reached a corner beyond which their paths diverged. "More luck to your elbow next time. You've got it in you."

"And showed a bit of it, I fancy," laughed Will, as he shook hands, and they separated.

The street into which he turned was dark, and seemed deserted.

But, he had not gone a hundred paces along it when the forms of a half-dozen men suddenly appeared before him.

Will drew slightly to one side to let them pass. Instead of that, however, he received a violent blow on the side of his head that sent him reeling into the street.

"Go for him, lad!" came a voice, which if it imitated as that of the English sport. "Hammer him into a jelly!"

But, taken by surprise as the boy had been, his old training served him in good stead. He was instant on his guard, and backed, step by step, before his

antagonists, until he reached the shelter of the opposite wall. "Come on, you cowardly dogs!" he cried. "C'mon to me as you are, I don't care a fig for the crew of you."

With cries and curses his foes had followed, striking fiercely at him, but kept off by his skill in the art of self-defense.

And now, when he felt the backing of the wall behind him, he began to take the offensive, knocking two of his antagonists headlong into the street, with two well-aimed blows.

"Come on!" cried Will, as he warmed up to the work. "I am ready for your whole cowardly gang."

But, six to one is severe odds. They crowded in on him in a body, striking from every side. For every hit he got in he received one or two in return. Finally a staggering blow of a slung-shot, or some hard weapon, fell upon the back of his head, from one of his foes who had got partly behind him.

Will was sent reeling out into the circle of his foes, whose blows now fell thick and heavy.

"Pile it into him! Punch the infernal hound!" yelled the Englishman, pressing forward.

But, Will had recovered his wits, and dashed his left hand into the face of the sport, with a force that knocked that individual clean off of his feet. He fell, with a heavy thud, into the stony street.

"That's for you!" shouted Will.

"And here's for the rest of them!" exclaimed a new voice.

Evidently a powerful ally had come to Will's aid. His antagonists fell to right and left, like leaves before the wind, while an exclamation from Pierce Browning's vigorous voice accompanied each fall.

"Down, rogues! Down, dogs!" he yelled, as his mighty fists struck sledge-hammer blows.

"And down it is!" exclaimed Will, giving the last of his foes a settler between the eyes which knocked him clear out of time.

"You're a horse, Pierce!" cried Will, pressing his friend's hand, as he drew up beside him in expectation of another onset from his discouraged foes.

But they evidently had the fight pretty thoroughly taken out of them. They scrambled to their feet and ran in the opposite direction, as if not caring again to encounter those fists of steel. The last of them, indeed, received an aid to his flight from Pierce's heavy boot, which raised him in a kick that sounded as if it must have broken some of his bones.

"How is this, boy?" he asked. "Who are they?"

"The sport we gave the whipping in the woods," replied Will. "He has raised a gang to punish me, it seems."

"And it's lucky I took the idea of coming back to invite you to dine with me to-morrow. You were in a confounded rough circle when I came up."

"I hope you will always be as close by when I get in a row," replied Will, pressing his hand gratefully.

CHAPTER IX.

A RACE AND A MATCH.

It was no second rate dinner to which Will Wildfire had sat down with Pierce Browning. That good-natured giant never did anything by halves. He did not often give an invitation to dinner, but when he did his guest was sure to be well served.

They were lingering now over the nuts and wine, conversing gayly over the events of the past few days.

"By the way, my boy," said Pierce, stretching his limbs in his lazy way. "Have you any business on hand for the rest of the day?"

"Nothing that couldn't be as well done ten years from now."

"Then what do you say to a turn behind my bays? It is a glorious afternoon for a drive, and you haven't been on the Wissahickon road yet."

"I'm agreeable," rejoined Will.

"There's a bit of sport on the carpet," continued Pierce. "The English athletic games come off to-day at Schuetzen Park."

"You are not calculating to take a hand in them?" asked Will, with a quizzical look at his lazy friend.

"No, nor a foot either. I hardly think I would make my fortune on the ... or jump; though I might be of some use if I came to a close hug. We will stop there, at any rate."

It was not long before they found themselves upon the road, behind a handsome pair of long-stepping bays, and seated in a light, one-seated carriage.

"This is what I like," remarked Pierce, skillfully handling the reins, as they entered upon the smooth roadway of the park. "Walking is a very useful exercise in its place; and very necessary—where one can't afford a horse. But I hardly think that walking is good for my constitution."

"You have too much weight to carry," said Will, looking at the huge proportions of his friend.

"Now we Yale boys are used to that sort of exercise. I would think nothing of twenty-five miles on a stretch."

"Twenty-five miles! whew!" whistled Pierce, a look of odd discomfort on his face. "What in the world are you made of? Have you got a private team engine within your corporosity? I don't know any escape steam."

Will laughed. "I can do it, though; and will show you what I mean." In Yale muscle if you choose to walk alongside."

"Now, see here, Will Wildfire, have you had your 'Don'ts'?" growled Wildfire, a little warmly. "If you could presume too much, a little warmly, twenty to the have relays of wheel my good nature, walking as a ... I might follow you men—say what you take me to be?"

"I can only try, gentlemen," he said, pushing up his sleeve, and displaying a well-modeled, muscular arm.

Quiet fell upon the throng as the youthful competitor lifted the heavy stone and held it lightly on his open palm. Surging his arm once, twice beneath the weight, he stepped briskly to the mark, and gave

Will laughed, and gave his attention to the road they were following.

This led through the park, over the Schuylkill by the Girard Avenue bridge, and around in the neighborhood of the future Centennial buildings. Open fields as yet marshaled the locality of the coming grand display of art and industry.

It was a splendid day for driving, and the road was covered with gay equipages, of every shape and size, all trolling along at a sober trot, under the keen surveillance of the Park guards, who quickly repressed any indication of breaking into a racing speed.

But above Belmont and in the broad, hillside sweep of the road toward Chamouny, this guard was not so rigidly kept, and Pierce shook out some more speed from his mettled animals.

They were near the steep descent to the Falls Bridge, when, from a side-road, there unexpectedly appeared the form of a tall black horse, bearing the slender figure of a lady rider, dressed in a sweeping robe of blue, and sitting her horse with admirable skill and grace.

She caught sight of them at the same instant, in a quick, embracing glance. Turning her head away, as to conceal her face, she shook the reins, and turned her horse down the steep road.

"Did you see her face?" whispered Pierce. "It is your girl, for a thousand! And she knows you. Look how she is dashing down that hill! Shall I follow?"

"Yes," answered Will, drawing a deep breath.

He might not have been so quick with his assent if he had known how reckless a driver Pierce Browning could be. The road was steep, narrow, and broken, but he turned his mettlesome animals into it at full speed, plunging down the gorge at a frighteningly dangerous rate.

The lady rider was two thirds of the way to the bridge. She turned her head over her shoulder in a nervous glance backward, and then touched her horse with the whip, as if fearful of being crushed by this reckless team.

Will, bold as he was, held his breath, looking keenly to right and left for the safest place to leap, when the crash which he feared should come.

"Now don't get nervous," said Pierce, in quiet sarcasm. "I've got hold of these ribbons. Bless you, boy, I could drive these horses down a precipice."

"All right," returned Will, in a resigned tone. "There's one comfort; you'll smash flatter than I will if it comes to a spill."

But the bays kept their footing nobly. They reached the level ground at the bottom of the declivity, and were drawn up to a walk on the bridge, with a skill for which Will had not given his new friend credit.

"Lord save you, boy," remarked Pierce coolly. " Didn't you see that my neck was in danger as well as yours? Now I think too much of this precious neck of mine to run any risks with it."

"Maybe you don't call it running risks," rejoined Will, laughingly. "Only, if I wanted a quiet family coachman, I hardly think you would answer for the situation."

"You asked me to overtake the girl on the black horse," explained Pierce, as they emerged from the bridge.

"Precisely. And I pity the girl on the black horse if you had overtaken her on that slope."

"There she goes, on the road to Wissahickon," remarked Pierce. "We've got a splendid level here, and the Park guards spread out thin. Shall I make another burst for it?"

"Let out," was Will's reply.

Shaking his reins, and touching the off horse with the whip, Pierce soon had the mettled bays again in rapid motion. Their perilous plunge down the hill had excited them, and they now dashed along the level drive with a long, sweeping stride that made little of the weight behind them.

The black horse was not a hundred feet in advance. But the fair rider was not inclined to be so easily overtaken. A glance backward showed her that she was again pursued, and in a moment her horse was put at his speed. It looked at first as if the bays would soon wipe out the space between them. But when the black got fairly down to his work there was a different tale to tell. He darted along the road in an easy, far-reaching trot which left his pursuers at a respectable distance in the rear.

"I'll be shot if that girl can't ride!" growled Pierce, in a half-angry admiration. "She sits her horse as if she was born to it. But she has got to do better work if she wants to distance me. I don't like the idea of being beaten by a woman."

He touched his horses with the whip. The fiery animals, little used to the lash, almost leaped out of their traces, dragging their heavy load along as if it had been but a feather.

The race had now become exciting. There in advance went the black horse, warmed to his work, and darting along like a racer, while his skilled lady rider sat her saddle as quietly as though she was at a parade trot. A stone's throw behind came on the thundering bays, burning with that spirit of emulation which horses feel as warmly as man.

The road was smooth, hard, and straight, was admirably fitted for such a competition, and along it they rushed at breakneck pace, heedless of the whistle of the Park guard whom they now passed.

On—on—for a mile the race continued, the black slowly forging ahead. Strong as the bays were they were overweighted, and the rattling pace soon began to tell upon them. The equestrienne looked back again, waving her handkerchief in triumph, as her horse broke into a fast gallop, and darted like an arrow into the Wissahickon road.

"Shoot me if she ain't laughing at us!" exclaimed Pierce, discontentedly. "There's something prime about that girl; I'll swear there is. She is worth going for, Will."

"But what a ridiculous wild goose chase she is leading me," rejoined Will angrily. "I hate all this confounded mystery."

"Oh! let her have her little fun if she likes it. It amuses her and don't hurt you," replied Pierce, reining in his horses with a strong hand, as another whistle sounded from the guards.

The black horse was out of sight, along the bends of the winding creek, where the romantic Wissahickon comes pouring down between its lofty wooded slopes, giving to this portion of Fairmount Park the wild charm of the mountain brook.

"How about the athletic sports of our English friends?" asked Will.

"We will strike them on our way back," replied Pierce, drawing up in front of the Hermitage, a noted resort on the Wissahickon drive. "We want a little refreshment first for man and beast."

It was an hour afterward when they reached the locality where the games were being conducted.

It was a broad level space, hard trodden, on which the competitors displayed their skill, while around them were gathered thousands of interested spectators. Bets were being freely offered and taken, and it was very evident that many of the on-lookers had indulged liberally in the wine-cup, or in some more fiery draught.

Pierce and Will pressed to the front of the ring of spectators, overlooking the space in which victory was sought for in leaping, running, and stone and hammer throwing, and in various other athletic exercises.

A wrestling match between two vigorous champions was being contested when they reached the ground.

Various comments were made and bets offered as the even character of the match became evident. With straining muscles and starting veins the combatants sought to hurl each other to the ground, but without success.

"Do you see yonder?" said Pierce, with a nudge to Will. "It is your sore-backed friend for a shilling! And laying himself out for a bet. Do you feel like accepting his challenge?"

Will looked in the direction indicated, and recognized Luke Lister, the English sport. He was the center of a group of busily-talking men, and was loudly offering to bet.

"Why are you looking so grim?" asked Pierce. "Have you not had satisfaction enough out of the man? His right eye is in mourning yet from the square knock-down you gave him last night."

"It is not he that troubles me," answered Will.

"Do you see that small built, foppishly-dressed individual to his left? The one with the waxed moustache?"

"Yes. But I do not know him."

"It is Mark Preston—the man who escaped you at the bridge. I fancy that my vow may soon be accomplished."

"Your vow?"

"Yes. To wear this whip until I could repay him with compound interest for the punishment he gave me. I have a notion to add a new game to the list on hand to-day."

"Be careful!" warned Pierce. "He may be surrounded by his friends."

"I would not care if he was surrounded by fire," rejoined Will, relapsing into a stern and gloomy silence.

The wrestling match at this moment ended, in a fall for the lighter of the champions. The victor was greeted with a loud shout of gratulation, as he walked triumphantly from the ring.

And now it was announced that the next competition was one open to all comers, an overhand fling of a twenty-five-pound stone.

"You had better try your hand at that, Pierce," said Will, jestingly. "A fellow of your build ought to give it an amazing send."

"Not much. I have not been brought up on such porridge," replied Pierce, with a lazy stretch. "Now a tight, trim college chap like you might go in there with some hope to win."

"I bet ten I can beat that work, anyhow," remarked Will, as one after another of the competitors tried their skill at putting the heavy stone.

"Done," exclaimed Pierce. "I take that bet, if only to see what there is in you."

"I will show you that it is not brag, anyhow," replied Will, stepping forward into the ring.

Some ten competitors had entered for the game, and had put the stone with varied success; two of them having considerably surpassed all the others.

There was some surprise manifested as Will Wildfire walked forward and offered himself as a competitor. His handsome, youthful face and gentlemanly attire contrasted strongly with most of those who had preceded him.

Varied cries arose from the spectators.

"He won't do it!"

"Yes, he will. Look at his build."

"I'll bet he hasn't the muscle."

From one quarter a laugh of derision arose. It was from the group which contained Luke Lister.

Will cast a quick glance in that direction, and then stepped lightly up to the standing point. As he did so he took off his coat, and handed it to one of the judges.

"I can only try, gentlemen," he said, pushing up his sleeve, and displaying a well-modeled, muscular arm.

Quiet fell upon the throng as the youthful competitor lifted the heavy stone and held it lightly on his open palm. Surging his arm once, twice beneath the weight, he stepped briskly to the mark, and gave

a third quick, vigorous surge. Every eye followed the missile in its flight through the air, and a loud shout arose as it struck the ground with a strong thud—five feet beyond the furthest mark of the previous throwers.

"By the Lord, he's done it!" cried an admiring individual, with a vehemence that made everybody laugh.

"And now, gentlemen," said Will, "if there's no objection I would like to propose another game. It is one that is not often played on this ground, but I think you will enjoy it."

"Yes!" came in a shout. "Let us have it."

Will had been looking sternly toward the spot occupied by his foes. Now, with a quick movement, he darted in that direction, and in a moment more came back into the ring, dragging Mark Preston by the collar.

"This young gentleman," Will explained, "took the opportunity to give me a private cowhiding a week or two ago. I have been waiting for a public opportunity to pay him back."

As he spoke the whip which he had carried concealed appeared in his right hand.

The astonished victim yelled lustily for help, and Luke Lister and his party sprang forward. But they were met midway by the gigantic bulk of Pierce Browning.

"Back!" he shouted. "I have a finger in this pie! The first man of you who steps an inch further will have me to settle with."

As the villains drew back, cowed by their opponent's tone and mighty bulk, Will brought his whip shrewdly down on Mark Preston's shoulders. Stroke after stroke fell quickly, dealt with all the vigor of his arm, over shoulders, head, and face of the crouching and screaming victim. It was all so quick and unexpected, indeed, that there was little time for any one to interfere, if they had wished.

"There, gentlemen, is my game," said Will, as he dashed his fist fiercely from him. "It is the game that some call revenge, and some retribution. I hope you have liked it."

He walked away, followed by his big friend.

CHAPTER X.

THE GERMANIA ARRIVES.

"HAVE you read the news this morning?" asked Lucille Maynard of her mother, as she sat looking over the morning paper.

"No, my dear, what is it? Not another outrage in China, I hope; or a rebellion in Russia?"

"China and Russia! No, indeed; it is much nearer home. It is Philadelphia with which we are concerned; and our own precious cousin, Will Wildfire."

"You don't say!" cried the mother, holding up her hands in surprise. "Why, what mischief has the young blade been at now?"

"Simply cowhiding Mark Preston, in the face of several thousands of people."

"Gracious, child! You don't tell me that? Well, I declare! But it was no more than he deserved. I have seen the time I would have liked to do it myself."

"So Will has pleased you for once."

"But do read it! I am anxious to know how it happened."

Lucille read the account, which was somewhat colored by the imagination of the reporter. The latter, however, had managed to learn Will's provocation to his revengeful act, and presented it in a way that was not likely to gain the whipped man much sympathy.

"Served him right," was likely to be all the salve which the public would pour on the wounds of Mark Preston.

"And they had such a time to escape," continued Lucille, dropping the paper. "Will and his friend were attacked by a crowd of rough characters; and some others came to their aid; and for a little while there was a severe battle."

"They were not hurt, I hope?"

"Oh, no! They came out all right."

"Well that is some comfort."

"But that is not all the news, mother. Here is a shipping item of some importance. The Germania has arrived in New York."

"The Germania?" inquiringly.

"Yes. Don't you remember? The steamer that Ralph Emerson was to sail in."

"Goodness! So it is! I had forgotten."

"I must set off for Lancaster at once," replied the young lady, rising decisively.

Simultaneously with this conversation, Will Wildfire was walking leisurely down South Broad street. He was decidedly at ease in his mind, the weight of disgrace which had rested upon him having been so signally removed.

"See here, Will," cried Ben Huntly, meeting him opposite the Academy of Music, "is this all sterling, solid, bottom-level fact?"

"Hardly," smiled Will. "There is a coating of imagination to skim off."

"But you salted him? That isn't gammon?"

"Why, I have a notion he is not feeling very comfortable just now."

"Give us your hand, boy! I'll be hanged if you ain't worth your weight in gold-dust!" And Ben shook his hand with a fervor that would have crushed any delicate bones. "Why didn't you tell me? I would have given my cap to be there."

"The whole business was sprung upon me," replied Will. "I would have given something for your seasoned fists for one five minutes. Luke Lister and his gang of roughs gave us lively work, I promise you. I fancy I got in a good half-dozen knock-downs. But you should have seen lazy Pierce. Such a wakening up you never dreamed of."

"Pierce Browning!"

"Yes. Why, they lay before him like sardines in a box. He just mowed a clear swathe through them."

"Oh! my hard luck! Why wasn't I there?"

"I don't say that we escaped without some severe knocks," continued Will. "They were in force. But part of the crowd joined our side, and we drove them clear off the field."

"Good for you!" exclaimed Huntly, in admiration. "Hang me if I won't let you beat me in our next boat race! I'd like to join you in your walk, Will; but I'm on business."

"Don't let me detain you."

Huntly walked away, laughing to himself, and clapping his knee with his hand.

"It was the neatest job out," he exclaimed. "That boy has the making of a man in him, and no mistake."

Will walked slowly on, smiling at the enthusiasm of his friend.

He had passed Spruce street, and was at some distance in the next square, when he met a young lady, who was walking in the opposite direction, and who had dropped her veil just before meeting him.

She seemed to hesitate as they approached. For an instant she almost stopped, and then moved quickly forward again.

Will looked at her with surprise. There was something indefinitely familiar in her form.

She paused again, when she had nearly passed him.

"Excuse me, Mr. Wildfire," she said. "But—I hope you—"

Will had turned at her first hesitating utterance.

"Proceed, miss," he politely remarked. "I shall be happy to hear what you have to say."

"Is it true that you had that affair with Mr. Preston?" she asked, in an agitated tone.

"I punished him slightly," returned Will. "If you are she whom I suppose you to be you will not blame me for it."

"It is no matter who I am," came the voice from behind the veil, whose thick texture permitted the merest outlines of the face to be seen. "But you do not know Mark Preston. You have been warned against him before. You have had a foretaste of the lengths to which he will go. After this public disgrace I fear—"

"I thank you for your concern," said Will, gratefully. "But you need have no fears for me. I fancy myself quite a match for Mark Preston."

"Yes, yes! in the light, perhaps. But not in the dark. You are too open; too direct. He will not meet you openly. But beware that he does not take you unawares."

Will smiled, and looked, in his young self-assurance, able to cope with a dozen such foes.

"Does he acknowledge to the whipping?" he asked. "I fancied that he would have a score of reasons for his scarred face."

"He does nothing but curse, and vow vengeance," she replied. "But you must obey my warning! He is a dangerous and unscrupulous foe. And—and—do not implicate me, I pray you. It would be terrible to me should he learn that I have warned you."

"You need not fear. Particularly as you keep yourself so closely concealed from me," said Will, discontentedly. "I am sure I made a strong effort to see you yesterday."

"But you could not overtake my Selim, my bonny black!" she rejoined, with a sudden laugh. "What a race we had! And the way you drove down that hill! I expected nothing but that you would be dashed to pieces."

"I expected little more myself," acknowledged Will. "My friend is a regular Jehu of a driver."

"But he could not match my Selim on a level," she laughingly rejoined.

"You ran away from me then; I hope you will not now. How am I to avoid betraying you unless I know you?"

"What a lawyer you would make!" replied the lady, still laughing.

"But you cannot escape me as easily as that. I have your forget-me-not."

"Which I am sure was never intended for you."

"And I have your face imprinted upon my memory."

"I would not be too sure of that."

"You do not know what a quick photographic machine a pair of sharp eyes are," laughed Will.

"You may be mistaken."

"Prove it to me, then."

"Is the face on your mental negative anything like this?" asked the lady, suddenly throwing up her veil and revealing one of the most beautiful countenances his eyes had ever rested upon, the eyes now sparkling with mirthful light, and the lips seeking in vain to repress their smiles.

"No," exclaimed Will, starting back with a gesture of surprise and admiration. "It is a faded-out old photograph as compared with the lovely reality. How could you have had the heart to hide such beauty behind that envious veil?"

"Beware!" she cried, holding up her finger in admonition, and again letting fall the veil. "You are not to be trusted, I see. But you will remember my warning?"

Her voice took a graver tone.

"I certainly shall. But you—why need you fear such a man as Mark Preston?"

"Do not ask me! He has a deep—a fearful hold upon me!" Her voice was now thrilling with emotion, as she turned and walked hastily away.

The noon express train from Philadelphia came steaming into the broad-flagged station at Lancaster, and halted at one of the coolest, most comfortable-looking depots on its long westward journey.

It was the afternoon of the day in which the events just narrated had happened. Among the passengers who descended from the cars were two of the persons with whom we have become acquainted in these pages. One of these was Lucille Maynard, the pretty cousin of Will Wildfire. The other was Mark Preston, also his cousin, but anything but good-looking just at present.

His hat was drawn down low over his eyes. But it could not conceal an ugly scar that crossed his cheek, and which was patched up with court-plaster.

He started as his eyes fell upon the fair face of the young lady, who passed him without noticing his presence.

"Aha!" he muttered to himself. "Is that the way the cat jumps? So the pretty Lucille is bent on having a finger in this pie? Poor girl, I fancy you are destined to be disappointed."

He placed himself upon her footsteps, following her to a residence in one of the upper streets of the town. Lucille was intending to spend her time here with a friend to whom she had written.

The spy saw her enter, but saw nothing of the gust of enthusiasm with which she was welcomed by her young lady friend.

He turned away with a look of satisfaction.

"When you are on the track of foxes it is always best to know their hiding-places," he muttered.

"And now for my friend, the justice."

The office of Justice Esmond was situated on a business street of the city of Lancaster, not far from the railroad station.

That gentleman—a mild-faced, blue-eyed person, with not a particle of guile in his composition—looked up in some surprise as Mark Preston entered his office.

"I am glad to see you," he said; "but what in the world ails your face?" A person might think you had been in a railroad accident."

"Nearly as bad," replied Mark, with a weak effort at a laugh. "A runaway, a smash-up, a roll down a hill. All not very comfortable, you know. And rather hard on tender skins."

"You don't say?" exclaimed the sympathetic justice, swallowing his lie whole. "I am sure I am very sorry."

"Oh, it is nothing! It will soon heal," Mark hastily replied. "You got my letter?"

"Yes, and the room is at your service. You will not want it long, you say?"

"Not more than a couple of weeks," rejoined Mark. "I have some business to transact in Lancaster, and will need office room, as I wrote you."

"This will make you a very good office," replied the justice, leading the way to a small apartment, opening on a side street, and adjoining his own office.

"I fancy that will do." And Mark took a comprehensive view of the surroundings, with more meaning in it than his unsuspecting friend imagined.

CHAPTER XL

RALPH EMERSON ARRIVES.

"Your dear friend and cousin will not love you any the more for the beauty marks you have left upon his face," remarked Ben Huntly, as he leaned easily back in his chair in Will Wildfire's hotel apartment.

"I suppose not," rejoined Will carelessly. "Not that I care much. Have a cigar, Ben? Here are some prime Conchas."

"Don't care if I do," replied Huntly. "I say, Will,—as he lit his cigar—"is it true that the will of your uncle has not yet reached this country, and that there has been found a previous will, giving Mark Preston the estate?"

"This cigar draws confoundedly hard," said Will. "Yes. I believe there was something of the sort. I shall have to change my cigar store."

"Well—if you don't take matters blamed easy! And with a fellow like Mark Preston to deal with! Suppose he should manage to get hold of and destroy the last will, before it is proved?"

"It would be deuced uncomfortable," rejoined Will, who had just got his cigar to smoking easily, and who seemed more pleased with this success than troubled about Mark Preston.

"But did you not tell me that you had received a letter warning you that some rascality was in train?"

"By Jupiter! yes. I had forgotten all about it."

"Hang me if I wouldn't make a harder fight for a fortune if I was in your shoes!" cried Huntly impatiently. "By what steamer is the gentleman with the letter to arrive?"

"By—let me see—by—I think it was the Germania."

"And the Germania is in."

"Well, if that ain't rich!" cried Will, starting up so suddenly as to overthrow his chair. "And I was to be in Lancaster to checkmate some confounded scheme, that I know no more about than the man in the moon. I must be off at once. You will excuse me, Ben. Business, you know."

"I wouldn't go before the next train, if I were you," Huntly dryly rejoined. "You are like a horse that needs a fire built under it to make it go, but which there is no holding back when it's once started."

"I never did more than one thing at a time in my life," answered Will, impatiently. "That's the Wildfire vein, to do one thing at one time, and to do that with all our might."

"You will have to wait two hours for the next train, at any rate," said Huntly, consulting a newspaper time table. "So you will have time to finish your cigar, and lay out some plan of action."

"Plan of action! I never laid a plan of action in my life. I go in for taking the chances, and playing my trump cards whenever I hold them. Eh? a telegram for me?"

This was addressed to a hotel servant, who had just appeared at the door.

Will tore open the telegram and read it hastily, a perplexed look coming upon his face.

"Is there any answer?" asked the servant.

"Yes—One moment." He read the epistle again.

"Yes. Send this."

He hastily jotted down a few words in pencil, and handed them to the servant, who disappeared.

"Read that, Ben," said Will, turning to his friend.

"There's the deuce to pay now, or I'm much mistaken."

Hunty took the paper, and read its contents aloud, as follows:

"Do not come to Lancaster. The will has been stolen. It is probably in the hands of a little black boy, a servant of Mark Preston. Watch the trains coming in from Lancaster. He will likely be on one of them. Have him seized and searched."

"LUCILLE MAYNARD."

The two friends looked at each other, with peculiar expressions.

"The ball is up," cried Hunty. "Who is Lucille Maynard?"

"That is the name of a young lady cousin of mine, whom I have lost sight of," replied Will. "She has not forgotten me, it seems. I believe she has expectations from this will.—When is the next Lancaster train in, Ben?"

"It is due inside of an hour."

"Then let's make for the depot instanter. If we can only get hold of this fragment of midnight.—But perhaps you have other engagements."

"No. I can go with you."

In five minutes more the two friends were in the street, *en route* for the Pennsylvania Railroad depot.

But the reader must accompany us to Lancaster, to trace the events which gave rise to this telegram.

Vigilant as Lucille Maynard was she had yielded to the solicitations of her friend, in whose judgment she placed great confidence.

They had closely consulted the time-tables together, and found that there would be no through train from New York to Lancaster until the next morning, except one that would arrive late at night.

"It is not at all likely that he will come in that," said the friend. "And I scarcely think you would like to be waiting for a train at midnight."

"I hardly know," replied Lucille doubtfully.

"I will tell you what. Suppose you describe this Mr. Emerson to my father. We can get him to wait for the train, and to see if your friend comes in it."

"If it will not be too much trouble?"

"Certainly not. It will be no new experience for him to stay up till midnight."

And so it came to pass that the brother waited for the train, and passed the arriving passengers under inspection, and announced that no such person had arrived.

That is what comes of using a second-hand pair of eyes. Mr. Emerson had arrived. But the description had given the youthful look-out an utterly wrong impression of him, as descriptions are very apt to do.—So that the person looked for passed under the eyes of the spy unrecognized.

It was eight o'clock the next morning. Mark Preston had been for nearly an hour in his new office, adjoining that of Justice Esmond. He was busily engaged in reading the morning papers when the justice looked in upon him.

"Early this morning," was the jocular remark.

"Yes. There isn't so much comfort in a hotel, than one wants to lie abed late."

"How's the face? You must have had a rascally tumble."

"It feels something better," was the reply. If I don't have it yet out of the horse that threw me!" He gave vent to his suppressed feelings in a fierce oath, directed against the horse.

"Oh! hang it all! the poor bridle did not mean any harm," expostulated the justice.

"But I do. I'll teach him a trick worth two of that."

Justice Esmond withdrew to his own office. Kind-hearted as he was, he felt somewhat shocked by this tone of bitterness against a brute animal.

A sour smile marked the villain's face as he resumed his reading. Those white teeth of his glittered with a tiger-like gleam.

The door of his office that looked upon the side street cautiously opened, and a face peered into the room. It was a small, round, comical-looking face, of midnight blackness.

"Marse Preston," came in cautious tones from the thick lips.

Mark dropped the paper and looked up hastily.

"Is it you, Pete?" he asked. "Come in. Don't stand grinning there like an ape."

Pete slipped in and carefully shut the door behind him. He stood with his back against it, the queerest contortions twisting his odd features, while he kept jerking out his thumb in mysterious pointings toward the adjoining office, and then drawing it in again, as if afraid of being caught in some unparable crime.

"What in the devil's name alls the boy?" queried Mark, impatiently. "Have you been eating something that don't agree with you?"

"I have see'd him!" announced Pete, mysteriously.

"I done follered him. In dar, Marse Preston."

He again pointed to Justice Esmond's office.

"Who?" asked Mark, his voice sinking to a low tone. "Mr. Emerson?"

"De bery identerbal german you tolle Pete to look out for. Golly! but I foched um. Tain't de fust time I see'se him. At ole Marse Wildflower's, you know. Fore de time he tolle you to git. Neber forgit dat time. Neber!" And Pete clapped his sides,

and gave vent to a repressed laugh, which twisted his face into the most ridiculous contortions.

"See here, you blasted young imp!" cried Mark, angrily, as he strode across the room and seized the boy by the collar. "If you speak of that again—"

"Oh, Marse Preston!" exclaimed the boy, in sudden terror. "I didn't say nuffin' bout de kickin'; cos you tolle me I musn't. Oh, Marse Preston!"

"Hang you! If it wasn't for making a noise, I'd shake the wool off your brain-pan!" cried Mark, in suppressed tones of restrained anger.

"Marse Emerson in dar!" rejoined Pete, glad of such an opportunity to escape punishment. "He in dar, cuah. Golly! won't do to shake Pete, cos Pete mouth yell."

"Yes, you imp of darkness; I know your tricks," replied Mark, releasing the boy.

He was not anxious for an uproar in the room, just at that particular time.

A few words ensued in a low, cautious tone, and then Pete withdrew to the street, glad to escape from his choleric master, and ready to act the spy on Justice Esmond's office with a shrewdness with which the boy was well gifted.

Mark Preston immediately had his ear to the door of communication between the two rooms, striving to gather any words which might come to him from the conversation proceeding beyond.

Nor were his efforts quite without success.

Meanwhile Lucille Maynard was seeking to carry out her part of the programme. She had got young Arlington, her friend's brother, to make inquiry as to late arrivals at various hotels. In this manner she learned of the presence of Mark Preston in Lancaster.

"He must have some decided object in view," she remarked, "to make his appearance here so soon after the severe cowhiding which Will Wildfire gave him. I will need to be shrewdly on the alert to outwit him in his schemes. But it is strange that there is no account of Will's arrival. Has he paid no attention to my letter of warning?"

A through train from New York was shortly due, and she and her friend walked to the station to meet it. The few passengers who got off at Lancaster passed under their inspection, but there was no sign of Ralph Emerson among them.

It was with a feeling of disappointment that she turned away.

"May he not come by some of the local trains from Philadelphia?" suggested her friend. "He may possibly have stopped over a train in that city."

"That may be," replied Lucille, thoughtfully. "Let us see when the next train is due."

They found that they had two hours to spare. As the time approached for the coming of the train, Lucille and Miss Arlington again sought the station.

They had not been there long when a train from Harrisburg steamed in.

"Look at that funny little black boy!" said Miss Arlington, laughing, and pointing toward the ears.

Lucille looked up and recognized the lad at a glance. It was Pete, Mark Preston's servant. The boy saw her at the same instant. He had seemed on the point of entering the car. But he now backed off, trying to look unconcerned, and loudly whistling a favorite street melody. He disappeared in the gentlemen's apartment of the depot.

Lucille had noticed under his arm a package, about six inches square, which he clung to as tightly as if it contained some valuable treasure.

"I don't like that," she said, musingly, as she walked with Miss Arlington down the platform, and explained who this boy was.

The train steamed away again. In ten minutes after its place was taken by the westward-bound train, Lucille had seen nothing more of Pete. He had vanished. Nor did she see the person for whom she was waiting. Ralph Emerson was not on the train.

"It is very strange," remarked Lucille. "He should certainly have been here before now. And—"

She suddenly became silent, her face growing full of deep surprise.

For there, before her, coming from the direction of the town, stood Ralph Emerson, the very person she had been seeking.

Mutual expressions of surprise, and warm greetings ensued.

"But I have been looking for you. When did you arrive?"

"At midnight, last night."

"Why, Miss Arlington's brother was on the watch for you. It is strange that he did not see you."

"And why are you on the watch for me?" asked Mr. Emerson, in some surprise, but with a genial smile. "I did not know that my coming was so anxiously awaited."

"Yes! there are reasons!" explained Lucille hurriedly. "Reasons which respect the papers you bring concerning Harry Wildfire's estate. Excuse me for asking if you have them safe?"

"Not in my own hands," he replied. "They are too precious documents for me to be carrying around in my journeys on other business. I have left them in charge of my friend, Justice Esmond, until I get through with the private affair which calls me to Lancaster. You will remember that I wrote to you to that effect."

"Yes! yes!" hurriedly. "But—are they safe there? I have reasons for doubting—"

"Doubting what?"

"Not your friend—but a villain who will seek to possess himself of these documents. They may be lost even now! Let us go at once to see!"

She was so excited and energetic that Mr. Emerson looked at her in greater surprise than ever.

"Certainly," he said, "if you wish it. But I think you are frightened without any just cause."

In ten minutes they were in the office of the mild-faced justice.

"You will excuse me, Mr. Esmond," remarked Mr. Emerson, with a smile. "But this young lady has become frightened about the safety of the package I gave you. Please convince her that it is secure."

"Certainly," replied the justice, rising, and unlocking a drawer in his desk. "I hardly think that the thieves who break in and steal have yet—"

He suddenly stopped speaking, his face displaying a ludicrous astonishment.

The drawer was empty! The package given him in trust had disappeared!

CHAPTER XII.

JUSTICE ESMOND EXCITED.

If the mild-faced country justice had been stung by a hornet he could not have danced about his office more vigorously, than he did on discovering the loss of the package intrusted to his care.

Justice Esmond was naturally excitable, and this unexpected loss had a remarkable effect upon his nerves.

"Mein Got!" he cried, dropping into the Pennsylvania Dutch dialect, as he was apt to do when excited. "I lock it up in dat drawer. It is not dere now. Dat's very queer. I hope you don't tink me a thief, Mr. Emerson?"

"Certainly not," replied Emerson, though his face was full of anxiety and discomposure. "But where can it have gone? Have you been out of your office since receiving it?"

"For one hour only. From ten to eleven. But I leave it locked up tight behind me."

Lucille, who had listened with a pale face to this short colloquy, now spoke.

"You left the door locked," she said. "But here is another door, where does it lead?"

"Dat! Oh! dat's locked on the other side. Dat's the office of Mr.—what's his name? Mr. Preston."

"Who?" cried Lucille, with sudden emphasis.

"Mr. Preston, Mark Preston, from Philadelphia."

"Well, I declare!" exclaimed Miss Arlington, breathlessly. "Is not that the man of whom you told me, Lucille? The man who has an interest in making way with these papers?"

"How long has he had this office?" asked Lucille.

"Since yesterday."

"Then it is clear enough now how your drawer came to be emptied. He is the thief. He got possession of your letter, Mr. Emerson, and knew that you intended to leave the papers in this gentleman's charge. Can you not see through the cunning plan he has laid to possess himself of them?"

"I can!" cried Justice Esmond, in sudden wrath. "And I'll have the law of him, too! To come into mine office! and open mine drawers! and steal mine papers! Dunder and blitzen, but it is very aggravating!"

He rushed fiercely to the door of communication, but it was locked, and no answer came to his violent knocks and cries for "Mr. Preston."

After a minute thus uselessly employed, he rushed outside, and tried the street door with equal ill-success.

"Dat's certainly very queer," he said, as he excitedly returned. "He rob me, and den lock the door, and walk. I never had no such thing happen to me before. Never."

"I suppose not," rejoined Emerson, dryly. "And I wish to Heaven you had not had the chance now. Depended upon it, he is the thief."

"Of course he is," exclaimed Lucille, impatiently. "And he must not be permitted to leave Lancaster. Break that door down, sir, if you cannot open it by other means."

"Wait one minute only. Dere's a locksmith just down the street."

The excited country justice left the room in a most vigorous hurry, and returned very soon with the mechanic in question, whom he set to work to try and open the locked door.

They all gathered around, impatiently watching his efforts.

"Well, if that isn't what I call decidedly cool!" came a sarcastic voice behind them, as the street door opened and closed. "Do you think there is anybody dead in there? Or are you trying a bit of private burglary?"

They turned suddenly at this familiar voice. There, before them, stood the slender, foppishly-dressed figure of Mark Preston, showing his white teeth in a peculiar smile. With him was another gentleman, whom Justice Esmond recognized as a well-known citizen of Lancaster.

"How d'y'e do, Cousin Lucille? I didn't expect to see you here," said the villain, with smiling, self-possession. "And Ralph Emerson, I declare! Well, this is certainly a meeting of old friends!"

"I've god him!" cried the little justice, rushing excitedly forward, and seizing Mark by the collar. "The thief! the burglar! the highway robber! that comes into mine office and robs mine drawers!"

"Let go!" exclaimed Mark, fiercely, shaking himself loose. "What in the blue blazes do you mean, to lay hands on me in that way? I have knocked many a better man down for a less insult."

"You rob my drawer!" ejaculated the justice, running across his office and pointing to the empty drawer. "You steal mine papers! You—villain!"

"Well, this is comfortable," Mark coolly rejoined, addressing his companion. "Is this gentleman a little touched here?" pointing significantly to his head.

"I think not," was the reply.

"What is wrong, Mr. Emerson?" asked Mark, quietly taking a chair. "I don't expect to find out from Justice Esmond, who has certainly been stung by a bee. But perhaps you can inform me."

Ralph Emerson's tall form seemed to grow taller, as he looked down upon the nonchalant villain.

"It means," he began, with severe emphasis, "that I intrusted certain important papers to this gentleman's care; that Mark Preston, who alone had an interest in their disappearance, knew they were to be left in his care; that he took an office communicating with his on the preceding day. And it means, finally, that the papers are missing."

"And that Mark Preston has stolen the last will of Harry Wildfire, which disinherited him," supplied Lucile, in an indignant tone.

"So! Now we are coming to the point of the joke!" Mark coolly replied, removing his hat and placing it upon his knees, while he daintily wiped his scarred forehead with a scented handkerchief.

"Yes!" cried the justice, shaking his long finger at him. "And I'll have a policeman in, and lock you up, and search you, and—"

"There, there, there," said Mark soothingly. "Do keep cool my dear sir—I don't relish this charge, Mr. Emerson. When did you leave these papers, of which I never heard before, with Justice Esmond?"

"At eight o'clock this morning."

"Then you certainly give me credit for great skill. So I entered his office; unlocked his drawer, with false keys, under his very nose; and stole his papers, unseen before his eyes!"

"I said not so," exclaimed the excited justice. "I was out of mine office. Den you come in and stole my papers."

"Oh! you were out of your office? When, may I ask?"

"From ten o'clock till eleven."

"And that is when I broke into your drawer and stole your papers?"

"Yes. Just den. For I was in the office all the other time."

"I am very glad to hear that," rejoined Mark, with his tigerish smile. "It gives me an opening for a neat little charge against you, of making way yourself with this gentleman's papers and then trying to lay the theft on me.—Will you please inform these somewhat excited persons, Mr. Cummings, at what hour this morning I came to your place of business?"

"At nine o'clock precisely."

"And have you lost sight of me since?"

"Your charge against this gentleman will not hold water," replied Mr. Cummings, turning with dignity to the excited accusers. "Mr. Preston and I have been together since nine o'clock this morning. If you want further evidence of this, I can refer you to Joseph Homer, Esq., with whom we were closeted from ten till twelve. Therefore I fancy that Mr. Preston will have no trouble in proving an alibi."

The three accusers looked at each other, quite taken aback by this unlooked-for statement.

"Do you know this gentleman, Mr. Esmond?" asked Mr. Emerson.

"Why—yes," acknowledged the confused justice. "Mr. Cummings is a reputable citizen. His word is evidence.—But who opened mine drawer? Who stole mine papers? Will not somebody tell me dat?"

"I would be happy to tell you, if I knew," rejoined Mark, with a sarcastic laugh. "Perhaps you would still like to search me. It may have stuck to me; like some perambulating chestnut burr. Or to examine my office. It may have got in there without my knowledge. I will save your locksmith the trouble of opening the door."

In a moment he had unlocked and thrown open the door.

"Here it is, at your service. Come in, and make your search."

Justice Esmond followed him, hesitatingly into the office.

Lucile was about to follow, when she was stayed by a touch on the arm from Miss Arlington.

"Did you not tell me that the black boy, whom we saw at the depot, was this man's servant?" she whispered.

A flash of light came into Lucile's pale face. The question had opened up a new field of thought which had escaped her during the excitement of the last half-hour.

"Well thought of, indeed!" she exclaimed. "That opens up the whole matter. Mr. Emerson."

"Well?"

"What was the size and shape of your package of papers?"

"It was some six inches square, by perhaps two inches in thickness."

"Then the whole mystery is revealed. It is not in Lancaster now, but is on its way to Philadelphia."

She continued to talk eagerly with him in a whisper, unnoticed by Mark Preston, who was in his own office.

"I believe you are right," said Mr. Emerson.

"Then I shall telegraph immediately to Mr. Wildfire, to be on the look-out for him."

She hastily departed, accompanied by Miss Arlington.

CHAPTER XIII.

ON PETE'S TRAIL.

WILL WILDFIRE and his friend, Ben Huntly, were unsuccessful in their quest for the sable youth, who had become so important an individual.

Train after train came in—but not Pete. In fact, their ideas of guard duty were hardly suited to the character they had to deal with. Pete had received special orders to keep his eyes open. This meant a great deal to the shrewd little rogue. In consequence, while Will and his friend were quietly inspecting the passengers who came through the gate, from the train, Pete was making his way backward through the railroad inclosure. In a few minutes he reached the fence of this inclosure, at a distant

spot. Over this he went, with the agility of a monkey, carefully holding on to his precious package.

"I am afraid we are on blind trail," said Will, as the passengers from the Lancaster express all passed through the gate, with no sign of their guest.

"Hi! hi! Bet a dollar nobody don't foller Pete!" grinned the boy, at the same moment, as he reached the road on the other side of the fence.

He had outwitted Lucile Maynard, at Lancaster, by running along the platform, under cover of the depot building, passing around the engine, and slipping into the cars on the other side of the train.

He had now outwitted Will Wildfire, in a similar manner. He chuckled triumphantly to himself, as he hurried along Thirtieth street, toward the Spring-Garden street bridge, not caring to risk the danger of discovery on the Market and Chestnut street bridges.

"Marse Preston says Pete must keep his eyes skinned. Spec' thar's somebody lookin' fur dis little nig. Ain't a-gwine to luff 'em catch me, you bet. Not if I hab to swim de river."

"What's in the books next?" asked Ben Huntly of Will Wildfire, at the same moment.

"There are other trains due within the next few hours," replied Will. "But the young rascal may have been in before we got here. I hardly think we can afford to lose time. We had better leave our guard duty in the hands of this officer, and carry out our further plans."

"Will he be able to recognize the boy?" asked Huntly.

"Why, I never saw him, Ben. I only know what the telegram says. He can look out for a little darky as well as you or I."

"That's true," rejoined Ben, after an instant's thought. "Let us post him then."

An hour afterward the two friends made their appearance in a certain ale-house, in which, as the reader will remember, Will had had a game of fist-fights some weeks before.

The bar-tender looked up with a smile of intelligence, as he saw them enter.

"Do you remember me?" asked Will, resting his elbow negligently on the bar, and looking the bluff Englishman in the face.

"Don't I?" returned the latter, heartily. "I haven't forgotten the neat way in which you floored Luke Lister. It does one's heart good to see a bruiser laid out in that fashion. And by a chap who hasn't grown a beard yet! I hardly see where you raked up your muscle."

"I keep it here," said Will, smilingly, tapping his arm. "Yes, two glasses of ale," he continued, as the bar-tender significantly handed a tumbler. "You'll take ale, Ben?"

"Guess I might venture."

"All right. Is Luke Lister often around this way?"

"Occasionally. But I have not seen him since you floored him."

"Do you know where he lives?" asked Will, as he threw a quarter on the bar.

"Not exactly. I could come something near to the place."

"This is prime ale," remarked Will, as he took a sip of the nut-brown, white-capped beverage. "As for our mutual friend, Luke—"

"He is no friend of mine," was the interruption.

"And I doubt if he is in love with me," laughed Will. "I have had some little affairs with him since. Tell me where he lives, as near as you can."

"I know it is on Somerset street, but I can't give you the number. It is between Fourth and Fifth—nearest to Fourth. You can easily find it."

"Thank you, I expect to have a little more business with friend Luke, and may need to call upon him. But don't tell him to expect a visit—in case you see him. I prefer to make it a surprise."

"I see," said the bar-tender, grinning. "There's something in the wind?"

"I can just smell the odor of rascality, from that quarter," answered Will, as he finished his glass.

They were not quite wrong in their idea. Luke Lister had appeared to be Mark Preston's confederate in rascally schemes of late, and it was natural to conclude that they might be leagued together in this business.

At all events, Somerset street would be a desirable place to visit.

Ere going there, however, Will returned to his hotel, hoping to receive some further communication from Lancaster.

Nor was he disappointed. There was a telegram awaiting him.

It was longer than the preceding message, and read as follows:

"The boy is not to be found here. He has probably succeeded in taking some train. Mark Preston defies us, but we have had him arrested at a venture, on the charge of employing this boy to steal the papers. We will keep him under arrest as long as possible, and see that he does not correspond with his confederates. If the boy escapes you, then make all efforts to trace the papers. They will hardly be destroyed without orders from Preston." —RALPH EMERSON."

"Ah!" said Huntly, "your pretty cousin has got a gentleman to do her telegraphing! Who is this person?"

"It is the gentleman who brought the will from Europe; and who certainly should feel responsible for its loss. Well, the match seems to be open, Huntly. Will you enter for it?"

"The handicap race between Will Wildfire and Mark Preston, eh?" queried Huntly, with a laugh.

"I'm your backer, for a thousand. Let us strike at once for Somerset street."

It was approaching night when they reached the locality in question.

It was a street of medium width, but not of any busy traffic. On the contrary it seemed rather sleepy and grass-grown, than active and wide-awake. It was, in fact, an unpretentious, down-town avenue, in one of those regions where the chief product seems to be dirty-faced children, who swarm around door-steps and over pavements as thickly as bees about the front door of their hives.

"Ugh! it smells bad down here," said Will, with a sniff of disgust. "I wonder if the street-cleaners have not forgotten that there is such a street."

"Don't you fancy that," replied Huntly. "They are too busy to remember it at other times."

"Hush!" hissed Will, grasping his arm, with a quick, tight clutch. "Do you see yonder? Look at the sable mite of humanity who has just left the door of that house near Fourth street. I wonder if he is our game?"

"You can bet high that he's worth running down and investigating," cried Huntly, with energy. "It is our duty as gentlemen and Christians to overhaul and go through that African diamond."

"Then you follow him, Ben. Cautiously, mind. I will hurry around the square, and head him off in Fourth street. If the spry little eel suspects we are after him, he will be sure to slip through our fingers."

"All right," said Huntly. "But you will have to stir."

And Will did stir. Any one who saw him would have fancied that his house was on fire, and the news just come to him. His pace, however, became suddenly sober when he reached Fourth street, at a point several squares northward.

A glance told him that all was yet in good shape. The half-grown citizen of African descent, who was the object of their thoughts, appeared just before him, progressing in a peculiar, erratic fashion, as if he was constitutionally opposed to walking in a straight line.

Not far behind him was Huntly, walking with the staid, regular step of a man of business, and apparently quite unconscious of the sable dwarf before him.

And yet the boy seemed to be distrustful of him. He kept making short halts, to glance in a shop-window, or to scratch his head against a lamp-post; and all these occasions served as opportunities to cast a quick look back at his apparently unconscious pursuer.

"Dat cat won't jump worf a cent," muttered the boy. "I've seen that gentman afore, suah. Tain't his supper he's arter. Tain't codfish cakes an' lasses—no, siree. It's Pete he wants. But he ain't cotched Pete yet."

The boy clapped his hands on his knees, and gave a shrill, elfish laugh, as if in high amusement at the thought of any one catching him.

But his amusement came to a sudden termination. For a strong hand grasped him by the shoulder, and a pair of bright, young eyes looked sternly down into his.

"But I've cotched Pete," came from Will Wildfire's lips. "Hurry up there, Ben. Let us yank the young rascal off to the station-house."

Pete's face became half-white with sudden dread. The thought of the station-house was to him like that of some giant's castle, whose hungry proprietor amused himself by crunching prisoners alive.

He squirmed like an eel in the hands of a fisherman. But Will's fingers held him with a vice-like vigor.

"Oh! lawsee, marse!" he ejaculated. "I ain't done nuffin'; jess nuffin' at all! Luff me go, please! I's a poor offin, I is, widout fader or mudder, or nobody. Oh! please, marse!"

"You're a confounded young rogue," answered Huntly, pinching the boy's ear. "Where have you been? What house was that we saw you come out of?"

"Dat house? Oh! don't you know dat house?" asked Pete, innocently. "My great-gran'mudder lib dere. She's so ole—oh! so mighty ole!"

"And you are mighty young to lie so glibly," said Huntly, with another sharp pinch.

"Oh!" cried Pete, with another squirm. "Fore de Lo'd, marse, dere ain't no lie in it. It's jes' so."

"Your great-grandmother, then, is a big man, with side-whiskers, and a nose like a door-knob?" asked Will, holding Pete's eyes with his strong gaze.

"Yes," faltered the boy, after a moment's hesitation. "Yes—sartain—only so mighty ole. You never see'd—"

"Such a rascally little liar," supplied Will. "Now come, boy; if you want to escape the station-house you will have to tell the truth. What brought you down here? What did you leave with Luke Lister?"

"Wid Luke Lister?" faltered Pete, turning whiter yet, in astonishment.

"He's concocting another lie," said Huntly. "There is no use to fool here. Let us off with him at once."

"Oh! don't, marse! Now don't!" pleaded Pete. "I ain't done nuffin'. I only took a—a pound of mutton from de butcher down to dat house. An' dat's jess so."

Will laughed, with involuntary amusement. "I'll be hanged if the boy ought not to be pensioned as the premium liar," he remarked. "Now see here, Pete, I know something about that pound of mutton. Suppose I tell you what sort of sheep it came from. You went with your master, Mark Preston, to Lancaster. Between the pair of you that pound of mutton was stolen from a butcher's stall up there. Then you brought it down to the

city, slid the back way out of the cars with it, and brought it down here for Luke Lister's supper."

The boy's face was a picture of astonishment, as he listened to this graphic account of his proceedings, from a stranger. It seemed to him as if this man must be a sort of magician. His looks were evidence enough that Will had hit the mark.

"Dat's jess so," cried the boy, with his shrill laugh—after a moment's hesitation. "Marse Luke, he like Lancas'r mutton. So I fetch him some."

"Let us see him," suggested Huntly. "He may still have the papers about him."

The idea was a good one, and was not difficult to put into effect, for Pete's attire was not very complicated.

A minute's examination showed that there was no package of papers concealed about him.

"Shall we take him to the station?"

"Not if he acknowledges the truth," replied Will. "Come, now, Pete; did you give Luke Lister a package of papers?"

"Dunno what was in 't," rejoined Pete. "It were all tied up, ever so tight. But he's got um, suah."

"What instructions did you give him about them?"

"'Structions? What is 'structions?'" asked the boy.

"Dunno what dat am, nowhow."

"What did you tell him to do with them?"

"Oh! Is dat 'structions, den? Why, he's to keep 'em. Dat's all. Dere weren't no oder 'structions, 'cept dat."

"Now, see here, boy," said Will, sternly. "You don't want to go to the station-house?"

"Oh! lawse! You ain't goin' to tote me dere arter all? Arter I'se tolle everything, jess the true?"

"Will you promise not to tell about our catching you, and questioning you, if we let you off?"

"Tell 'bout it?" ejaculated Pete in a tonishment. "Spec Pete's a fool? Why Marse Preston'd murde me if he knowed it.—Jess don't you tell, dat's all."

"You can slide then," replied Will, laughing.

He opened his hand, and Pete shot out like a swallow, darting up the street as if he felt that the shadow of the station-house was still upon his path.

CHAPTER XIV.

WILL'S RECEPTION.

"SOMETHING must be done, and that immediately," said Will to himself, as he reclined in his after-dinner chair, in his hotel apartment.

A night, and half a day had elapsed, since the events of our last chapter, and he had not yet succeeded in forming any plan for circumventing Luke Lister, and obtaining possession of the papers.

"To take the police there would be the signal for their destruction," he continued. "Still, it will never do to leave them in his hands till Mark Preston gets free, or ever gets an opportunity to send orders to his agent. I must act at once; and the only plan I know of is to strike straight at the mark. Luke Lister is my game; and that plumb from the shoulder."

"I'd give something, though, to know more about the lady of the black horse," he mused, as another vein of thought came to him. "I might learn something useful from her. She seems strangely connected with Mark Preston."

At this instant his line of thought was broken by a tap at the door. On opening it he found there a hotel servant, who announced that a lady was waiting to see him in the parlor of the establishment.

Wondering who it could be, Will made his way to the apartment in question. He found it to be empty with the exception of one figure. This was a veiled lady; but a glance was sufficient to satisfy him that the form before his eyes could belong to but one person—the one who had been in his thoughts a minute or two previously.

Will hastened forward.

"This is an unexpected pleasure," he exclaimed. "I wished for you only this minute—and here you are in answer to my wish."

"Like an old-time fairy, I suppose," she replied, in the gay tone which she often assumed. "And how can I serve my knight, who has called me to him with a wish?"

"By telling me how best to overcome Mark Preston. You, who know him so well, may perhaps know more of his schemes than you have yet advised me of."

"I know him much too well," she sadly replied.

"Yet I fear that I cannot help you in the scheme of which you speak. Of late he has kept his secrets from me. He distrusts me, perhaps."

"Why do you speak thus?" Will impulsively asked. "Has he a power over you? Why do you fear him, as you appear to do?"

He took a seat and drew it up closely in front of her, seeking to read the face that lay hid behind its throning veil.

"I have every reason to fear him," she answered. "He has got a frightful power over me, and I dare not resist his commands. It is this that brings me here to-day. I have been afraid to make a confidant of my troubles. Yet I am sure, from your face, that you will not betray me; and you may be able to give me some useful advice. There may be a way out of my difficulties."

"I don't profess to know anything about law, if it is that kind of trouble," said Will, his young face full of sympathy. "But so far as I have any judgment I will try to help you. You can depend upon me, Miss—Or, excuse me for asking if I am right in addressing you in this manner. You are not married to Mark Preston?"

"No, thank heaven!" she fervently exclaimed. "But I fear that I shall be forced to become his wife! It is that which brings me here. I would rather die!"

Her voice, intense with feeling, rung in Will's ear like the voice of one in mortal peril.

"Tell me all," he earnestly cried. "If he is persecuting you, trust me to find some means to relieve you. But do throw off that blinding veil. I would talk with you face to face."

She replied by throwing back her veil, and revealing that lovely face of which Will had gained but a stolen glimpse before. It was now full of feeling, but a lurking smile played about the mouth, called up by his impulsive request.

"Thanks!" he said. "That face would draw the sympathy of the most cold-blooded of men. Ask me to do anything for you, and I am at your commands."

A faint blush tinged the fair cheeks of the lady, but it was evident that she was not displeased. Will's admiration was too earnest to give offense, despite his enthusiasm.

"No compliments, I pray you," she rejoined, a smile flashing over her features. "And now shall I tell you what is my object in coming here?"

"Yes. I am eager to know."

Will's earnest young eyes were bent with mingled curiosity and admiration upon the fair face before him, over which the shadow of sorrow had again fallen.

"My name is Clara Moreland," she began, resting her hands upon each other, as she looked confidingly into his face. "I need not tell you that I am yet quite young."

"No, you need not tell me that," smiled Will.

"I was still younger when I first met Mark Preston. I was an orphan, with no one to advise me. He was soft-toned and specious. Is it any wonder that I grew to fancy myself in love with him, or that I responded to his suit by promising to marry him? I am not the first girl of seventeen who has been fooled by a fair face and a gentle manner."

"But your eyes are open now," protested Will, with more of personal feeling in his voice than he imagined. "It is not too late to withdraw."

"Alas! I dare not!" was her sad response. "I am too deeply in his power. And he is pitiless. It would be ruin to me to defy him."

"Perhaps not," rejoined Will, quietly. "You may be deceived in this, too. What dreadful thing have you done?"

"I have committed forgery!" she cried, in accents of bitter pain. "I have forged my uncle's name! He knows it! Mark Preston knows it! He holds the forged paper over me as a continual threat."

"Forgery! By Jove!" whistled Will. "That is a bad business. But he holds the paper, you say. What is it? A check?"

"Yes. He made it a check." She wrung her hands in deep emotion. "It is he that has done it all! But it is I that must suffer. I would not for worlds have my uncle know of it!"

"But the check has not been presented for payment?"

"No, no! He holds it still, as a threat over me, to force me to this hateful marriage!"

"Then the business may not be too late to mend," Will coolly replied. "But how came you to write it?"

"It was done as a joke. I am very skillful with the pen. I imitated my uncle's signature without dreaming of this villain's purposes. He kept it and the blank check upon which it was written, without my knowledge. And now, that I hate and despise him, he threatens me with exposure, if I dare to withdraw from my promise to marry him."

The fair young face was full of agonized feeling as she spoke. She wrung her hands unknowingly.

Will, his face full of warm sympathy, drew his chair closer.

"Why not defy him?" he asked. "Why not tell your uncle the whole circumstance?"

"I dare not," she replied. "You do not know my uncle. Such a cold, bitter, prejudiced mind, I fear he would never forgive me, or believe me. No, I must sacrifice myself to Mark Preston, hateful as he is, rather than that!"

"You shall not, then!" cried Will, impulsively rising. "Ah! I have it! Do you know where keeps this dangerous forgery?"

"Among his papers, in his private desk, I believe."

"Then, all is fair in war. Mark Preston is at present under arrest at Lancaster. There is an opportunity for you to seek for this paper. You have the right to force his desk open, if need be. I would help you but I must at once seek to overthrow another scheme of his."

"I half fear to undertake it," she exclaimed, her face suffused with a new light. "But, but—"

"There is a little black boy," suggested Will, who seems to know his secrets. Have you any influence over him? Can you get him to help you?"

"Little Pete," she replied, her face lighting up.

"Yes. He will do anything for me."

"Then go at once. Lose no time, for every minute may be precious," exclaimed Will. "Mark Preston is approaching the end of his rope. If you are quick and decisive you may be able to defy his threats."

"Thanks! A thousand thanks!" she cried, impulsively seizing his hand. "Oh! you give me new life! If I succeed, how can I ever repay you?"

"The time may arrive," said Will, with a slight blush, "when I may ask for payment. Till then I will keep your 'forget me not,'"

She hastily dropped her veil and released his hand, as another lady entered the room, recognized at a glance by her quick eyes.

The new-comer was a neatly-dressed young lady, with a very pretty face, in whose features Will recognized something familiar. Her eyes ran rapidly over the scene before her, and a look of displeasure settled upon her face, as if she was not quite

pleased to see Will Wildfire in the company of this young lady.

"I would like to see you for a few minutes, when you are at leisure, Mr. Wildfire," she said.

"Certainly, certainly," replied Will, in surprise.

"In one moment, miss."

"If I am to be run down with women, it is lucky they are all so good-looking," he remarked, to himself.

"Don't fail in your good intentions," he said. "It may be now or never. And let me know the result."

"I certainly shall," was her reply, as she left the room.

Will turned toward the other lady, who stood in a somewhat defiant attitude, scorn and anger upon her face.

"I shall be happy now, Miss—but I have certainly seen you before," declared Will, looking earnestly into the charming face before him.

"I think you have," she rejoined, a smile chasing the displeasure from her face. "I hardly thought that you could forget me."

"Ah! I have you now," was Will's eager and joyous exclamation. "I know that roguish look of old. It is Lucille Maynard! My fair cousin Lucille!"

"It took you long enough to find it out," she sarcastically rejoined.

"I have been in the look-out for you ever since I have been in Philadelphia," he replied. "I did not know where to find you. And you have changed so from the freckled little girl of old—and have become so marvelously pretty, that I couldn't be expected to recognize you at sight. But it is never too late to mend, Cousin Lucille," he continued, drawing her impulsively toward him, and kissing her.

"I doubt if you are mending, Will Wildfire," she exclaimed, releasing herself from his arm, with a flushed face. "You have all the old impudence."

"Only cousinly affection, Lucille. If a chap can't kiss his cousin, who is he to kiss, I would like to know?"

"The strange, veiled ladies, with whom he has private interviews, perhaps," replied Lucille, looking keenly at him.

"Oho! sits the wind in that quarter?" cried Will, with a laugh of amusement. "Why, cousin, I know no more about her than of the man in the moon. She called to see me entirely on her own business."

"Was it that that made her fling you the bouquet on the day of the boat race? or that made her haunt you as the Queen of the Night at the masked ball?"

"Why," remarked Will, somewhat displeased, "have you been keeping a watch over me?"

"An involuntary one. No more than you need, perhaps. Have you forgotten the German girl you danced with at the ball?"

"Ah! I see it all now. I must have been blind not to recognize you. But never mind this woman, Lucille. She is no more to me than to you. She is one of the victims of Mark Preston, against whom we are both in arms. I received your message yesterday."

"It is that brings me here to-day. Have you acted upon it?"

"Partly. I failed to catch the boy. But I have since learned where he left the papers."

"Then you must lose no time in capturing them," she impulsively exclaimed. "In spite of all our efforts, Mark Preston has succeeded in sending a letter to Philadelphia. This may contain orders to destroy the package. There is no time to lose."

"Do you know to whom the letter was addressed?"

"Yes. To Luke Lister."

"Then the game is growing hot, in earnest," cried Will, springing hastily to his feet. "Luke Lister is the man who has the papers. I shall go for him at once; and have them, or know the reason why."

"Go armed then," she quickly rejoined. "I know of this man, and what occasion he has to owe you ill-will."

"I don't fear him, nor a dozen such," said Will, drawing up his athletic form.

"But go armed," she earnestly repeated. "You do not know what contingency may arise. And go at once. Every minute now is precious."

"You are right, Lucille," he rejoined, accompanying her to the door. "A fortune is worth a hard fight; and I will not let it go by the board, if only for your sake. May I claim a cousin's privilege now, Lucille?"

"No," she replied, with a sarcastic smile. "You stole the privilege once, and now ask me to give it to you. I cannot reward theft in that way."

"But if I circumvent Luke Lister?"

"Ah! there will be another song to sing then," she laughingly rejoined. "Do that, and I will forgive you a multitude of sins."

"I will, or know the reason why."

He hastened to his room as she descended the stairs, and quickly dressed for the enterprise before him, not failing to adopt her suggestion, by placing a small pistol in his breast pocket. In a very few minutes afterward he emerged into the street, bending his steps, first toward a club-room in which he expected to find some of his friends. He might have need of them.

CHAPTER XV.

WILL CALLS ON LUKE LISTER.

"Have I not saved you from many a whipping, Pete?"

"I've cotched enough, anyhow," said the boy, with a bitter look upon his face. "I've cotched 'em heavy, dat's sartain. Marse Preston, dere ain't no let up in him, nary bit."

"And you would have had more, except for me."

"Da's so, Missie Clara," replied the boy, gratefully. "Dumno what'd come o' Pete, 'cept for you. Can't help doin' things; and Marse Preston, he can't

help kickin' me fur doin' 'em. An da's de way it goes."

"If I have ever helped you, Pete, you should help me now in return," remarked Clara Moreland, looking the impish little rogue in the eyes.

"Is't sumfin' g'in' Marse Preston?"

"Yes. He has treated me badly, too. I want you to help me revenge upon him."

"Ain't whipped you, too?" asked Pete, with a look of astonishment. "Goodee gracious! if he's done dat—"

"Not just in that way," replied Clara, laughing at Pete's comical surprise. "And yet he has injured me, seriously."

"Don't lub him much meself," rejoined the boy.

"Then you will help me?"

"But s'pose him fine it out?" queried Pete, with a grimace. "Won't he lick Pete? Lawsee, Missie Clara, he done skin Pete, cl'ar out."

"Do not fear, my boy," she replied, with a look of kindly assurance. "You shall be protected from him. If we succeed I will see that you are safe from his revenge."

"Is he in Philumdefly yet, or in Lancas'r?" queried Pete.

"He is in Lancaster; and likely to remain there; for he has been arrested for theft."

"Don't I know?" cried Pete, clapping his hands, with a laugh of impish delight. "Dey've done cootched Marse Preston fur dem papers? Hoopee! but ain't dat fun! An' it were Pete done it all! Oh, Lawsee! wouldn't I like to see um now. Jess say what 'tis, Missie Clara. Now's de time, while de ole boy's in de jail. I'll do mose anyting' so he don't cootch me. Marse Preston in jail? Well, if dat ain't de fun for this nig!" and Pete danced all over the floor in his delight.

It was no easy matter, in fact, to bring the boy down to sober attention to business. He would listen for a minute or two, with intense gravity, to his fair confederate, and then, as a thought of the funny situation of affairs came upon him, he would spring up and dance like a top, uttering screams of laughter. The idea of "Marse Preston in jail" seemed to him the very acme of comical incidents.

It, thus, took her a considerable time to make him understand her object. But the boy was shrewd enough, despite his wild outbreaks, and his mischievous spirit. He saw through the scheme better than she had supposed it possible to make him.

"Dat's fun, Missie Clara," he said, more soberly. "Anyting' g'in' Marse Preston's fun. I'm jess gwine to help you. An' won't he make de feeders fly when he fine it out? You bet!"

At an hour not long after this interview between Clara and her young confederate, an interview of a different character was taking place in another part of the city.

Luke Lister was seated in a room in the second story of his house, on Somerset street, intently engrossed in reading a letter which he had just received.

He perused its contents a second time, an oath breaking from his lips, as he did so.

"So he has got himself nabbed!" exclaimed the villain. "Just about what I looked for. Confounded fools half the men are anyhow. I bet a horse they wouldn't have grabbed me so easily."

He looked over the letter again.

"I suppose it means that I am to make ashes of the papers," he continued. "A chap that's in limbo has got to write in riddles, of course; but I judge that's what he's drivin' at."

He remained in deep thought for several minutes.

"Maybe he thinks I'm a fool, and need to be coached at every step," was the next observation. "I'd be a gay old Jack if I didn't know that those papers were dangerous goods. It's lucky I have my furniture well insured, for I am afraid there might be a fire on these premises that would be hard on both parchment and mahogany. He is the sensible man who lays his plans for danger before it comes."

"You will find him in that room," came a voice from without.

The door opened, and an ill-favored woman looked into the room.

"A gentleman here to see you," she said.

"All right. Show him in."

But a change came upon Luke Lester's face when he caught sight of the figure of his visitor. He made a hasty sign to the woman, who returned it with a look of intelligence, as she made way for the visitor.

There was a stern, serious expression upon her face as she walked slowly away, while Will Wildfire, for it was he, entered the room.

His host stood, knitting his fingers around the top of a chair, as if half inclined to make an immediate assault upon his hated foe.

But Will walked in as imperturbably as though they were the best of friends, and seated himself in cool disregard of the fierce looks cast upon him.

"Good-day, Mr. Lister," he politely remarked. "I presume I can have a few minutes of your valuable time."

"What in the blazes brings you here anyhow? hang your impudence!" roared out Luke. "To serve you right I'd brain you with this chair."

"Now don't, my dear sir," returned Will. "That's a little bit of advice I wish to give you. Don't. Chairs are nasty things to be flying about."

"We'll see that!" cried Luke, in a tone of exasperation.

In an instant he lifted the heavy wooden chair above his head, and rushe dupon his quiet antagonist.

The weapon descended with a force which might have been fatal, only that Will Wildfire no longer

occupied the same position. It fell, instead, upon the empty chair, both of them being broken.

"That is rather a bad exercise for furniture, Mr. Lister," said Will, coolly, from another seat which he had taken. "I'd advise you to quit it, except you are going to break up housekeeping. And I can give you another good reason for quitting it."

"What?" roared Luke, his face purple with rage.

"Only that you are butting against the wrong fence. If you try that neat little trick on again I might take a hand in the game. I am afraid it wouldn't be for your health."

"I don't fear you," cried Luke fiercely. "You took me at an advantage before. I am as good a man as you, any day, in a fair match."

"All right; if you think so," responded Will, rising, and preparing to throw off his coat. "I am not much in the way of fighting with a man in his own house. But still if you want a friendly spar, I don't know that I have any objection to accommodate you."

"Friendly spar be hanged!" exclaimed Luke, flinging himself heavily into a chair. "What brings you here anyhow, blast you?"

"Business, Luke Lister," replied Will, a stern look taking the place of his bantering expression. "I came for a certain package of papers sent you by Mark Preston, by the hands of his little black servant. You received them about this hour yesterday; and as I think twenty-four hours is long enough for you to be saddled with such a charge, I will relieve you of it."

He saw, from the expression of Luke's face, that he had hit the nail on the head. In fact the villain made no effort at denial.

"What right have you to them?" he asked.

"The right of ownership," replied Will. "You know, as well as I, that Mark Preston stole them."

"I know nothing of the sort," rejoined Luke. "And I will only give them to the man from whom I received them."

"You refuse me then?"

"Yes. That's about the way to put it."

"Very well. I wished to give you a chance to deliver them up quietly. As long as you will not I shall have the house searched by the police."

"The police be hanged!" cried Luke, snapping his fingers in disdain. "Do you suppose that I'm such a green blade not to know how to cheat all the police that were ever manufactured? I don't care a fig for your police."

He walked toward the door and threw it open.

"Stop!" cried Will.

"Why shall I stop?"

"Because I order you to."

"Then you are boss here?"

"Yes; so long as I hold a little persuader like this in my hand."

Luke had stepped outside the door. But he turned at these words, to find himself in point-blank range of a revolver, which Will was quietly aiming at his head.

"Drop that!" he hastily ejaculated, nervously ducking. "The confounded thing might go off."

"You're right," echoed Will. "It might go off. I would advise you to come back, out of range."

"What do you want?" asked the cowed villain, quickly returning into the room.

"Only to keep you company, that's all. If you are going after those papers I will go with you. I hardly think it safe to trust you out of this room alone."

"Blow me if I give you a paper!" exclaimed the villain, a look of peculiar exultation upon his face, whose meaning Will could not understand.

"Very well. You will keep me company then. We can be having a sociable time together while my friends outside are going through your establishment."

Throwing up one of the front windows, which looked out upon the street, Will blew a shrill blast from a whistle which he took from his pocket.

The street had seemed empty, but it was not a minute afterward when several persons appeared in it, approaching the house.

"Now, my dear sir, we will see who is to win the game," remarked Will, turning quietly toward his foe.

But the latter wore a look of exultation whose meaning Will could not comprehend. And there was something strange in the atmosphere of the room. It was becoming heavy and difficult to breathe. There was a smoky smell in the air, and a sense of heightened temperature, which seemed unaccountable.

Will looked at the triumphant face of his antagonist. There was certainly something in the wind.

"What does this mean?" asked the young man, sternly.

"There's something odd about it," returned Luke, with a sneering smile. "I am desperately afraid that the house is on fire."

His alarming words were confirmed to Will's senses by a double evidence. For, at this same moment, he caught a lurid flash of light through the open door, from the floor below. And a peculiar, crackling sound came upward from the same locality.

Simultaneously with this discovery came a cry from the street without.

"Fire! Fire! The house is on fire!"

It was the voice of Will's friends, whose efforts to enter the edifice had been unexpectedly defeated.

An uproar instantly arose. The street filled with people, as if by magic. Hundreds of voices added to the din.

"I am afraid these are going to be hot quarters," remarked Luke, with insufferable triumph. "Things seem to be roasting hot down stairs. Suppose we make tracks out of it."

"Was this done by that woman?" asked Will sternly, "I saw you signal to her."

"What does that matter now? We had best sleep, before it is too late."

"Hold, there!" cried Will, as Luke started toward the door. "The papers!"

"I am afraid they are cinders now."

"You lie!" exclaimed Will, again drawing his pistol. "Dare to take a step from this room till you have handed over those papers, and it will be with a bullet in your head."

"Hang it!" cried Luke in alarm. "Drop that pistol! There is only one way to escape, and it may be too late if we lose a minute more."

"Sit down in that chair!" exclaimed Will, approaching, and holding the pistol to the head of the shrinking villain. "That's right," he continued as Luke crouched down obediently.

He seated himself in another chair, pistol in hand.

"The papers?" he said.

"I tell you they are burnt up!"

"Then we will burn up too; for neither you nor I leave this room without those papers."

A dense smoke was rolling into the room, new lurid with the red flash of flames.

CHAPTER XVI.

MARK PRESTON MAKES HIS APPEARANCE.

"GOLLY, Missie Clara, but we's de chaps!" cried Pete in delight. "Know'd I could fotch um. Been dar before, suah! Dar's de old desk, an' you's just got to pile in."

Clara felt little less exultation than her lively young confederate, as she stood before Mark Preston's private desk, which he had just contrived to open.

She felt not one moment's hesitation, nor one qualm of conscience at this unlawful proceeding, for she had good reason to believe that this receptacle contained the forged check which had been held in terror over her for years, and which she saw no other means of getting into her possession.

"All is fair in war," she remarked to the boy, who stood grinning in delight before his handiwork. "Mark Preston has robbed me in more ways than one. He has papers relating to my property in that desk, which he got from me by treachery."

"Whar were de perfice, Missie Clara?"

"I was afraid of him, and dared not force him to return my papers."

"Den go fur um now, while he's in de stone jug," suggested Pete. "Mark Preston is Jess as slippery as an eel. Him mought pop in, 'fore we git froo. Tain't de time now for foolin'."

"You are right," said Clara, in a resolute tone, as she walked to the desk. "I will hesitate no longer. He has robbed me, and I am justified in recovering my own."

"He'll be heah, Missie Clara. Seems to me I smell him in de air. Dar ain't no stone jug kin hole Marse Preston. Jess you dig in, da's all."

The desk was an upright, old-fashioned affair, with a multitude of drawers and pigeon-holes. Some former experience had apparently taught her all its mysteries, and just where she would be most likely to find the concealed papers.

"This must be the drawer," she said. "But it is locked."

There was a disappointed look upon her face, as she sought in vain to open the closed receptacle.

"Lemme dar," cried Pete, with an air of importance. "I'll fotch um, suah. Mighty lucky Marse Preston forgot him keys. Lemme dar."

Pete was as good as his word. In less than a brace of minutes he had unlocked and thrown open the drawer.

"Had a notion dat key 'd fotch um," he triumphantly exclaimed.

With a hand that trembled with eagerness Clara drew out the drawer. She paid no attention to its contents, however, but laid it aside, and fixed her eyes on the cavity from which it had been drawn.

"It is in here," she excitedly remarked. "The secret drawer must be here. Fortunately I still remember the location of the spring."

Putting her hand into the depth of the cavity, she groped about with her fingers for a minute or two. These efforts were followed by a sharp click, and by a noise as if something had fallen.

Pete, who had been standing at her elbow, with his head stretched forward at a right angle with his body, his eyes starting, and his tongue protruding, sprang back at this sound with such indiscreet haste, that he rolled headlong on the floor.

"Golly, Missie Clara! Wa's dat?" he cried, in tones of alarm. "Sumfin' gone off, in dar! Pete t'ou' him were a goner, suah. Jess like a pis', fur all de world."

"Did it hit you, Pete?" she asked, laughing at the overturned boy.

"Dunno," replied Pete, with an air of great gravity, as he scrambled to his feet. " Didn't fotch no blood. But hadn't we best be gittin'? Don't like it heah, nohow," and he glanced around him with an air of apprehension.

"Yes," she cried, with glad enthusiasm, hastily examining certain papers which she had drawn from the cavity. "Yes! I have my papers! They were in the secret drawer. Now let Mark Preston do his worst; I can safely defy him!"

"Ha! What does this mean?" cried a sharp voice from the door. "My room entered! My desk broken open and robbed! So, Miss Clara, this is the way you employ yourself in my absence!"

The confederates turned in alarm to the door, to behold standing there the figure of Mark Preston, his face flushed with anger, while his lip curled with an expression of sarcastic triumph.

"It is well that I came back in good time," he continued. "I have no objection to lady visitors, but I

hardly like them to make themselves so very much at home.—So I have caught you in the act?"

He advanced into the room, a look of malignity upon his face.

"I but recovered my own," replied Clara, with an effort at defiance, though her face was pale, and her lips trembling. "I have but regained what you robbed me of. I have the forged signature, and the paper relating to my property, and I shall never give them up to you again!"

"You will not, eh? We shall see that!" and the unscrupulous villain advanced upon her, while she retreated until the wall prevented any further movement.

"Do not come near me! Do not dare lay your polluting hands upon me!" she exclaimed, with a dignity whose effect was lost in her evident fear. "I will never yield these papers! never! never!"

"That depends upon who is the strongest, my dear young lady," he sneeringly replied, grasping her left arm by the wrist, and seeking to wrench from her the check, which she held in this hand.

At this moment Pete, who stood just behind, shaking his fists at his master, called out:

"Frow me de papers, Missie Clara! Frow 'em to Pete! He can't catch this nig. Jess frow Pete de papers!"

The folded document relating to her property was in her right hand. In an instant she took the hint, flinging it over the head of her enemy, into the reach of the boy.

Pete caught it with the skill of a base-ball player, and at once darted for the door, crying out:

"Golly, if we ain't shet ole Marse Preston's eye dis time, suah!"

Mark Preston with a fierce oath, released the woman, and darted quickly after the mocking boy. But he might as well have chased the wind. Pete was out of the room and rapidly descending the stairs, before his master had fairly reached the door.

The latter suddenly gave up the chase, and turned back. The check was still in Clara's hands. That he must have, or the game he had played so long was lost.

She had advanced to the center of the room, looking eagerly around for an opportunity to escape. But there was but the one door, and the shrewd villain had taken care not to leave open this avenue of flight.

"I can attend to that imp again," he said. "Just now I must have that check."

"You shall not! You shall not!" she exclaimed, with wavering resolution, as she again retreated before him.

"Come, girl," he roughly cried. "There is no use playing the fool. You are in my power, and you know it. You will save further trouble by handing that over quietly."

Clara's face was deathly white, as she looked around on all sides, like a deer at bay, for some possible chance of flight.

A hoarse laugh came from his lips.

"There is only one master in this house," he sneeringly said. "My word is law here. Hand me that paper!"

"Here it is, then!" she cried, in a tone of desperation. "Make the most of it!"

As she spoke she quickly conveyed the check to her mouth, tore off the dangerous signature with her teeth, and chewed it rapidly into a pulp, while she flung the useless remainder of the paper into his sneering face.

"Take it, Mark Preston!" she exclaimed. "And take with it my release from your power over me! I am no longer your slave."

"By the gods, though, I will have revenge for this!" he yelled, his face purple with rage, as he again grasped her arm in a vice-like grip.

Clara feared him at that moment; feared him more than she had ever dreaded him before, for there was the glare of the tiger in the eyes which he bent upon her. A sudden thought came to her, a hope for safety.

"All your schemes have failed, Mark Preston," she exclaimed. "Will Wildfire knows of your theft of his uncle's will. He is at this very moment seeking your agent, to force from him the stolen will."

The expression upon the villain's face suddenly changed. Was he to lose the fortune he had worked for so unscrupulously to gratify an impulse of revenge?

He flung her arm fiercely from him.

"I will attend to you again!" he hoarsely cried. "After I have settled for Will Wildfire."

It was with no light feeling of relief that Clara saw him rush from the room.

"Will Wildfire is able to take care of himself," she said. "And as for me, I hope to never put myself in your power again."

With a look of exultation she left the room, in which she had passed through such an intense experience.

While this scene was being enacted the events recorded in our last chapter had taken place. But it was some time after the hour in which Clara had escaped from her enemy that the event occurred with which we closed that chapter.

We must now return to Luke Lister and Will Wildfire, the former of whom we left seated cowering in a chair, while his youthful conqueror, with stern and resolute face, occupied a chair opposite him, with the pistol directed in deadly aim at his head.

Yet it was no comfortable situation for a quiet *vis-à-vis*. The room was filling with smoke, while the red glare of flames, which looked at them from the open stairway, threatened soon to cut off all hopes of escape.

"Are you mad?" cried Luke, in despair. "We shall be burnt alive!"

"All right, my friend. I can stand it, if you can," was Will's cool answer. "But if you dare to stir from that chair, except to get those papers, I will put a bullet through you as sure as I sit here. And I am not given to boasting or lying."

Will looked, too, as if he meant it.

The villain's eyes rolled in fright around the perilous scene.

"I tell you the papers are gone!" he cried, with a despairing effort. "It is too late to save them!"

"You lie!" Will sternly answered. "The papers are in this room. They are on that side of the room. You cannot keep your scared eyes off the spot where you have hidden them. You can do as you please about getting them—but I have a serious notion that we will smother or roast together unless you do."

Will had guessed truly as to the locality of the papers. This was evident from the villain's look. But he braved it out for a moment longer, sitting sullenly in his chair, while the fire crackled and roared below, and the smoke which had half-smothered them gave place to the fierce glare of the increasing flames.

In the street the uproar grew more intense. The loud clatter of an engine coming to the fire was audible.

With a bitter curse the baffled villain arose, and walked toward the spot which Will had indicated.

It was a closet, within which appeared to be some secret hiding-place, for Will heard the click of a spring as Luke was for a moment hidden within the closet.

"There are your infernal papers," he cried, flinging toward Will a close package. "And now are you satisfied? Isn't it time to make tracks?"

"No. Not till I have seen whether you are playing some trick upon me or not," Will coolly replied. "Just take your seat while I examine this package."

"And not until I have had a finger in the pie," cried another voice in fierce accents.

They turned quickly, and beheld Mark Preston, who at that instant rushed into the room, having entered the house from some rear entrance.

"You shall never leave this house alive with those papers!" he sternly exclaimed.

CHAPTER XVII.

OUT OF THE BURNING HOUSE.

The uproar in the street was now at its height. Hundreds of people appeared to be before the house; engines were momentarily dashing upon the scene; the first one arrived was already pouring a stream of water upon the flames.

"Here! This way!" yelled a loud voice, as a hook and ladder truck thundered up. "This way with a ladder! Make haste! There are people still within that house!"

Indeed haste seemed necessary, for the flames were making rapid progress. The smoke which had rolled upward in thick clouds was dissipated, but the clear light of an intense blaze shone into the room, having eaten its way through the floor in one corner.

And the passage by which Mark Preston had entered was already cut off by a gush of flame, breaking through the floor, and shooting upward like writhing, fiery serpents. The heat was growing unbearable.

"Who will hinder my leaving here, Mark Preston?" Will sternly asked, turning toward his new foe.

It was a thoughtless movement, for Luke Lister took immediate advantage of it, by rushing forward and dashing the pistol from his hand.

It exploded as it struck the floor, the bullet darting harmlessly outward.

"It is our turn now, Luke," yelled Mark exultingly. "Go for him! You owe him a return for what he has done to you!"

In an instant the two villains rushed upon their youthful antagonist. Will was at a serious disadvantage in one hand being incumbered with the precious packet. He struck fiercely at Mark Preston with the other, but the agile villain eluded his blow. At the same instant Luke clasped him firmly around the body, hampering his further movements.

"Fling him, papers and all, into the fire!" yelled Mark. "No one will know but it was an accident. It is our turn now, Luke."

Yet hampered as Will was, it proved no easy matter to carry out their murderous project. The three foes staggered over the floor, backward and forward. Will being almost a match for the pair of them.

Yet they approached, nearer and nearer, to the red gulf from which the flames were surging.

But now, with a desperate effort, the young athlete loosed his left arm from their hampering clasp. In an instant it was extended above his head, holding aloft the precious package.

"This shall be saved, whatever becomes of me!" he cried, dashing it fiercely at the window.

The action was followed by a loud crash of glass, as the missile rent its way through a pane, flying with the impetus of a bullet across the room, and into the street without.

A curse of baffled hate broke from Mark Preston's lips.

"We will settle for you, anyhow!" he ejaculated.

Indeed it looked as if they would, for they stood almost on the verge of the flaming abyss of fire, from which a scorching heat enveloped them. And Luke Lister had seized Will from behind in such a way that the young athlete was held at a serious disadvantage.

One step more, and it seemed inevitable that he would be hurled into the flaming gulf.

But at this instant, with one fierce blow of an ax, the sash, glass and all, came crashing from its frame, and a tall, gigantic form leaped through the open space into the room.

A quick glance, a mighty spring, and Pierce Browning was upon the interlocked combatants.

"Four can play at that game," he cried, as he caught Mark Preston with one hand, and sent him whirling like a top across the room.

His other hand grasped Luke Lister in the same manner, tore him loose from his hold upon Will, and dashed him to the floor as though he had been a lifeless log.

"Lie there, you murdering brute!" he exclaimed. "And if the fire gets you it will be what you deserve! Come, Will, these quarters are getting too hot for comfort."

He dragged Will—who was somewhat dazed with the heat and smoke, and the violence of his exertions—across the floor to the window, and hastily helped him out upon the ladder.

"Down it like lightning!" he cried. "The fire is licking its rounds already!"

Will, whom the touch of the outer air had brought back to his senses, lost no time in obeying this wise command. He was followed down the ladder by Pierce, beneath whose weight the slender support groaned.

"Is there any one else there?" demanded a fireman.

"Yes, two hounds who ought to be roasted to burn the rascal out of them. But you can go for them if you wish."

There was no need to go for Mark Preston. He was already through the window and upon the ladder, abandoning his villainous associate in his selfish cowardice.

But two firemen immediately ran up the ladder, and entered the room. Nor were they any too soon. Luke Lister, half stunned by the violence of his fall, was only now groping his way to his feet. He would inevitably have perished had they not dragged him hastily to the ladder, for they were hardly out of the room when a great gush of flames broke through the floor, and surged in a crimson flood to the ceiling.

"A devilish narrow squeak!" exclaimed a veteran fireman, as he directed a stream of water through the open window. "I suppose you chaps were playing a game of euchre in there, by the quiet way in which you were taking things."

"What became of the package I flung through the window?" asked Will, looking inquiringly around.

"You flung through the window!" cried Mark Preston, virulently. "You want to rob me of that, too, do you, after trying to murder me in there? Gentlemen, this man set fire to the house, and then tried to fling me into the flames."

There were some fierce looks at Will, as this accusation was made in tones of indignant anger.

But the youth contented himself with a scornful shrug of the shoulders, and looked questioningly around him for the missing package.

"Don't give it to the villain!" cried Mark again. "It is mine, and I demand it from whoever has it."

"You had better come get it then," said a voice near him. "Here it is."

Mark turned and ran quickly to the person speaking, anxious to obtain possession of the precious package before Will Wildfire could again interfere. Once in his own hands he felt confident in his power to retain it.

But instead of receiving the coveted package, he found himself seized by the collar, a firm hand grasping him in a vice-like grip, while a voice which he now recognized called out:

"Here he is, Will! The thief and hound! What shall I do with him, confound his ugly mug?"

It was the voice of Ben Huntly, raised to a high pitch of indignation.

"Let him go!" yelled a fireman, or I'll flatten you out! Didn't we hear that this young villain tried to murder him?"

"That's so!" screamed Luke Lister. "He tried it on both of us! Go for him, lads! Hustle the smooth-faced hound!"

There was a surge of the disengaged bystanders around Will, who stood unmoved; though a red flush marked his face.

"Hold there!" cried Pierce Browning, placing his huge bulk in their way. "I have a word to say in this business. Was not I the first up the ladder?"

"Yes, yes," came several voices.

"Well, then, I found this pair of tender-hearted cutthroats doing their best to fling the young man here into the fire. If I hadn't been in time there wouldn't now have been much left of him but ashes."

"That's so!" exclaimed a fireman. "I was after you, up the ladder, and saw it all. They are a couple of infernal murdering rascals, and it would be only sauce to them to fling the brace of them back into the fire."

"Put them under the nozzle! Give them a drenching!" roared several voices.

The hilt was instantly taken. A dozen vigorous hands seized the two villains, despite their effort to escape, and dragged them before the house, where was an open space.

The next moment a burly fireman directed toward them the nozzle of the hose with which he had been sending a hissing stream upon the fire, and poured its drenching flood over their shrinking forms.

Their captors broke and ran on all sides, leaving them standing alone. In an instant they were knocked flat by the fierce torrent of water, and half drowned as it continued to drench them from head to foot, covering them with mud and gravel dug from the street by the hissing stream.

The two overturned villains crawled as quickly as possible out of the range of the suffocating flood, and scrambling to their feet, ran hastily into the thick of the crowd.

They were followed and assailed everywhere by shouts of derisive laughter. They presented, indeed, a sorry spectacle, with the water streaming from them in muddy rivulets, while down their faces coursed little channels of mud giving them a most ludicrous and disconsolate aspect.

"I've a notion their goose is cooked," remarked Pierce, who had stood by smiling, as if it would be too much of an exertion to laugh outright. "You've won the belt, Will. You're a diamond of the first water. You have got to give us a prime set out at Wildflower Hall for this."

"Won't I though!" exclaimed Will, joyously. "We'll make the rafters ring in that old mansion, or there's no strength in good lungs, or virtue in good cheer."

"And now let us be sliding," rejoined Ben Huntly. "That chap Preston has got as many tricks as the fox of the old fable. He will work some new game upon us yet, if we stay here."

With a last look at the burning house, in which the flames were now slowly yielding to the gushing streams of water poured on them from every direction, the three friends left the place, threading their way through the dense crowd which had been roped off from the immediate locality of the fire.

"How came you to get the package, Ben?" asked Will. "Did it strike near you?"

"I think so," replied Ben dryly. "Near enough to take me square in the breast, and knock me as flat as a flounder. I might have known that it was your hand flung it, by the way it came."

CHAPTER XVIII.

AND THE END OF ALL.

A BEAUTIFUL day in early November rested with all the soft charm of the Indian summer upon Wildflower Hall. The brilliancy of the autumn woods which had given their charm to the landscape when we were last there, was now fled. The trees lifted their branches leaflessly into the air, shorn of all their brilliant foliage, yet, looking in the soft November air, as if Nature had made a mistake in stripping them so early for the winter storms.

In the large saloon of the mansion a group of people were assembled, comprising most of those with whom we have kept company through these pages.

There were Will's young gentlemen friends, Ben Huntly, Harry Waters, and Pierce Browning, the latter leaning indolently back in an easy-chair, and seemingly far more interested in his finger-nails than in what was going on.

There was present, also, Lucille Maynard, her face radiant in its setting of golden hair; and her mother, dressed in her best black, and apparently deeming this one of the great occasions of her life.

Clara Moreland was also present. She had just ridden up on her noble black horse, and now sat somewhat apart from the rest, eyed with a dubious glance by Mrs. Maynard, who was still in doubt what to make of her.

This doubtful look, however, was partly intended for Pete, her sable confederate, who was also present, and who kept close to her as his one sure friend in the multitude.

"Is not that the strange woman whose behavior we so much distrusted?" asked Mrs. Maynard, in a stage whisper of her daughter, who sat beside her. "What brings her here?"

"We were mistaken about her," whispered Lucille, soothingly. "Cousin Will has told me all about her. She is another who has suffered from Mark Preston's villainy."

"Oh!" said the mother, with a partly satisfied sigh. "But the black boy? Is he not the spy? The one that got that letter? I am sure he is."

"Yes. But he is all right now. He has left Mark Preston's service."

"I am sure I hope so," returned the mother, with an air of relief.

There were several other persons present, the one of whom in which we have just now the greatest interest being Ralph Emerson, who sat, in his quiet dignified manner, beside a table in the upper end of the room. Upon this table there lay opened before him a number of papers.

"These documents have been preserved through great tribulation," he said, as he looked at the assembly, keeping his hand on one of the papers. "If I had dreamed of the great demand likely to arise for them I would have been more careful in regard to letting them out of my hands. Fortunately, however, they have been recovered. Otherwise I might have had a settlement to make with Mark Preston, which will not be necessary now. These are the will, and various accompanying papers, of Harry Wildfire, deceased, left by him in my care."

Eager attention was paid to him now, as he opened the will and prepared to read its contents.

"I hope it is all right," whispered Mrs. Maynard, to her daughter, "but I can't help feeling a trifle nervous. Suppose we are cut off after all. Ralph may have made a mistake."

"Ralph never makes mistakes," rejoined Lucille, quietly.

"Mem: I give and bequeath unto my cousin, Mary Maynard, the sum of twenty thousand dollars, to be paid to her out of my personal estate," read the steady voice of Ralph Emerson.

A sudden flush of joy came into the old lady's face, as her daughter softly repeated:

"Did I not say so? Ralph makes no mistakes."

"Harry Wildfire always was a gentleman," rejoined the mother, decidedly.

The items of several smaller legacies were now read, after which the reader came to the one most important feature of the document.

"All the rest and residue of my real estate and personal property I give, devise and bequeath unto my nephew, William Wildfire, the son of my beloved brother, John Wildfire, now deceased."

A cry of congratulation rose from all present. Ben Huntly seized Will's hand and shook it warmly.

"We'll help you spend it, my boy. Don't you be troubled on that score," remarked Pierce Browning, looking lazily up.

"Golly, but I see the boy who'd like to be dear myself," whispered Pete, in a voice that was heard all over the room.

A general smile followed the intense earnestness of the little fellow's remark.

The reader went quietly on, heedless of these interruptions. He was made executor of the will, in company with two other persons named. But the most interesting remaining feature of the document was a closing remark in reference to Mark Preston.

It ran as follows:

"Through certain misrepresentations, whose character it is not necessary here to detail, I was given a false impression of the conduct of my nephew, William Wildfire, at college, and was induced, in a moment of anger, to make a will leaving all my property to Mark Preston, whom I now know to have been the author of these misrepresentations. As I have, fortunately, learned the truth in regard to these false statements, and that my nephew has always comported himself with dignity and self-respect, I make this, my will, in his favor; and in punishment of Mark Preston, for his vile and false slanders, I leave him out of the list of my heirs."

"And serves him right, for a confounded, two-faced rascal!" said Pierce Browning, with unusual energy for him. "I'd feel like giving him a sousing yet, only that I don't think he has had it very comfortable for the last week or two."

"Hardly," replied Huntly. "Between his cow-hiding by our friend Will, his taste of prison life, and his bath under an engine hose, it seems to me that he has been repaid for some of his rascality."

"And the worst of it all is, that he has lost his game," rejoined Will.

"Dat ain't de wust ob all, nohow," cried Pete, protruding his black face from his corner.

"What is, then, Pete?"

"He's loss Missie Clara, dat's bad. An' he's loss Pete; dat's de wust. He's loss Pete, cl'ar out. 'Coz I's discharged um, and I's Marse Will's boy now."

The laugh that arose at Pete's idea of calamity to his old master broke up a certain stiffness in the assemblage. They mingled with each other, chatting and laughing, Will being overwhelmed with congratulations; of which also Lucille and her mother came in for no small share.

It was not long before the youthful proprietor of Wildflower Hall found himself cornered by his stately aunt, Mrs. Maynard, who poured out a series of congratulations and admonitions in a breath, which made Will wish she was on the other side of the sea.

"I have always entertained the hope," the good lady continued, "that you and my dear daughter Lucille might grow to esteem and love each other. You are only second cousins, you know; and it would be so pleasant to have the family cemented."

"Why—yes—" stammered Will, taken aback by this proposition. "Yes—of course—but—"

"Mamma! mamma!" appealed Lucille, who had happened to overhear this remark. "How can you talk so? What will cousin Will think?"

The young lady was crimson with blushes, and her tone full of distress.

"But, child, you don't let me finish," continued the mother, calmly. "I was about to say, my dear nephew, how sorry I was that my cherished idea could not be consummated. But Lucille, without consulting me, has engaged herself to Ralph Emerson. He is a good man, to be sure, but—"

"But, mamma," cried the blushing girl, "I am sure that cousin Will must be glad of the chance to escape me."

"I would not be so sure of that," replied Will, looking smilingly into the charming face before him.

"At all events, you are too late," said Mr. Emerson, placing his arm around Lucille's slender waist.

"you must give this prize up to me, in return for what I have brought you from beyond the seas."

"I will not stand in the way of a prior claim," rejoined Will. "But, if it had been an open field, I don't know—"

"I know then," replied Lucille, with laughing defiance. "I hardly think I could have been had by contract."

The next hour or two at Wildflower Hall were lively times.

An elegant dinner had been provided, to which the guests did ample justice, while jests, toasts, and all the enjoyments which make time pass merrily gave tone to the gayety of all their hearts, and made the old walls of Wildflower Hall ring with a merriment to which they had long been strangers.

It was late in the afternoon when Will stood beside Clara Moreland, on the roadside, near the gate leading into the grounds of the Hall.

"I am so glad," he said, "that you have succeeded in getting possession of that dangerous paper, and thus being able to defy your unscrupulous enemy."

"I feel so free!" she rejoined in a glad tone. "True liberty has been so long a stranger to me, that I can hardly tell you how I enjoy it."

"I thank you for taking the trouble to bring me word of your triumph. And also for being kind enough to make one of my own party of triumph."

"I am sure I have highly enjoyed it," she rejoiced.

"There is another reason," he continued, moving nearer her, and speaking in a lower tone. "There is another cause of my gladness at your escape from Mark Preston."

"What is that?" she asked, lifting her soft brown eyes to his.

"It is that I still retain a certain gift, bestowed on me by a fair hand. You cannot know how I prize my forget-me-not. If I could but add to it—"

He hesitated and was silent.

"What?" she asked in a low tone, her eyes now downcast, while a deep flush came warmly into her cheek.

"The hand which gave it to me," he resumed. "This fair hand, which I prize, which I love beyond—"

He suddenly dropped the hand he had taken, and turned away in a vexed manner, as a shrill boyish voice fell on his ear.

"Here's yer hoss, Missie Clara. Jess as much as Pete kin do to hold him. Ain't you feared to ride sich a outrageous black critter? Golly, I wouldn't ride um for a wagon-load o' cocoanuts."

"Take him away, Pete, Miss Clara is not ready for him yet," said Will, in a stern tone.

"Take um away!" repeated Pete, his eyes glittering with half-concealed mischief. "Can't take um away. Neber see'd sich a hoss! Keep's takin' me away. Jess wish you'd git on him, Missie Clara; 'cos he's too much for Pete."

Will could not help laughing as he saw the mite of black boy tugging at the head of the great black horse, who walked up to his mistress as quietly as if it had been a fly's weight at his bridle.

"I must go," she said, in a low tone, and with averted face. "Will you help me on my horse, Mr. Wildfire?"

Will silently led the horse up to a bank beside the fence, and quietly aided her to mount.

Her face was still averted as she said, "Thank you," in a scarcely audible tone of voice.

He still held her hand.

"Have you no word for me, Clara?" he asked.

"Not here, or now," she answered, gathering the reins in her left hand, and turning her face toward him, a faint crimson tinged her cheeks, a light of repressed excitement burning in her eyes.

He hesitated a moment, and then lifted the hand he held to his lips.

"I will see you soon," he said, releasing her.

In a moment more the uneasy black steed was trampling down the road, his fair rider not turning again, but leaving Will standing in a deep maze of doubt.

"Golly, but she's de pretty lady, Marse Will," said Pete, his eyes rolling with admiration.

"And you're a blundering black imp," rejoined Will angrily, walking away toward the house.

Pete stood in the road like a statue of astonishment, though shrewd eyes might have detected a concealed sense of enjoyment in his face.

"Wonder what we're goin' on 'tween Marse Will and Missie Clara?" he asked himself. "Pears as if Pete weren't wanted. Dis nig'r better keep cl'ar of dem two, or he'll git himself in trouble, suah."

A year has passed since the date of this merry-making at Wildflower Hall, a year marked with many events which we have no room to detail here. Will is still in doubt whether Clara Moreland returns his love or not, though anybody but a lover might have easily guessed that he had no cause to fear.

For Mark Preston, and his ally Luke Lister, have not been quiet, but have given Will trouble in more ways than one, and have effectually hindered a renewal of his declaration of love to Clara Moreland.

But all this has nothing to do with our present story, except to show cause why Will Wildfire is still a bachelor.

But he is hardly a disconsolate bachelor, for he has not his circle of friends, and do they not make the rafters of Wildflower Hall ring with many a merry song and lively jest, while music and dancing give a new youth to that staid mansion of the past?

As for Lucille Maynard, she is now Lucille Emerson, and is one of the happiest of Will's friends.

And as for Pete, he is still in Will's service, the liveliest, most mischievous little imp that could well be imagined.

As for the villains of our story they managed to avoid punishment for their crimes. Mark Preston had escaped from Lancaster by giving bail, and as the charge of the theft was not pressed against him, he was left with the knowledge of the failure of his plans as sole punishment.

And, though there was little doubt that Luke Lister was himself the author of the conflagration at his house, yet there was no positive proof of it, and no chance of convicting him for the crime. The insurance on his furniture, which was one of the objects of his crime, has not yet been paid, but he swears privately to his friends that he will make the insurance company sweat, if it refuses to pay up.

And so we leave our friends, for the present, enjoying the fruits of their actions, good or bad, as the case may be.

THE END.

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